MANACLED

BOOK THREE

by senlinyu

Chapter 1

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Regaining consciousness was like striking the ground after an interminable fall.

Hermione's head was throbbing; an agonising, bleeding pain, as though her mind had been ripped out and torn into pieces. She tried to get up from where she was lying, but her body couldn't move properly. The motions jerked, and her hands trembled.

She could barely see. She tried to push herself up, but her arm shook and wouldn't support her weight. She tried to breathe. Her heart was racing, a painful rapid thrum in her chest.

She reached out tremulously in the darkness trying to find her bearings.

Something touched her shoulder. She screamed and turned.

Draco was standing next to her, his pale hair visible in the dark. She jerked away but then froze and stared at him. Her heart was in her throat. She studied him with wide eyes.

He was older.

His face was the same, but his eyes were older, as though it had been decades since she'd seen him. His expression was closed, but his gaze was familiar and intent as he stood beside her bed.

"You're still alive," she said. Her throat was dry, and her voice broke with relief. "I thought you'd died."

She started to reach instinctively towards him. He was alive. He was still alive. She'd kept him alive.

His eyes widened.

"Ginny. She was the first body they brought back."

Her hand froze.

Everything hit her. Manacled. Imprisoned in Malfoy Manor to be bred.

He was the High Reeve.

Terror welled up inside her. Her blood ran ice cold. She felt as though she'd been struck so brutally she would die from it.

She gave a ragged gasp and snatched her hand back. Her jaw trembled, and she pushed herself away from him with shaking hands until she reached the far side of the bed. She slid off the mattress and knelt on the floor, staring across the bed at him as she struggled to breathe. Trying to reconcile everything.

It was Draco. He was still alive.

But he'd hurt her. He'd raped her. He'd told her he didn't want her; that he couldn't wait to kill her. She felt like an injured animal struck on the motorway, bewildered and dying and trying helplessly

to find a way to escape and hide. She wanted a dark corner to curl up in where things would stop hurting.

What happened?

As she tried to think, an agonising pain laced through her brain so abruptly her vision disappeared. An anguished moan escaped through her teeth. She buried her face in her hands as she struggled to keep conscious and tried to remember through the blinding pain in her head.

“Let’s be clear, Mudblood. I don’t want you. I never wanted you. I’m not your friend. There is nothing that will bring me more joy than being done with you.”

He’d killed Ginny.

He’d killed everyone.

She looked up and started breathing faster and faster as she stared at him, trying to understand.

“Are you still a virgin, Mudblood? Is that something you even remember?”

The sensation of her skirts being pulled up, exposing her as she stood bent over a table, gripping it, trying not to shake or make any sound.

He’d dragged her before Voldemort and held her in place while her mind was torn to pieces and then left her lying on the floor in a pool of rotting unicorn blood.

Hermione kept staring at him. There was a tearing pain in her chest—in her heart—as though there were a blade slicing through her as she struggled to breathe. Her chest contracted sharply and a broken, gasping sob was torn from her as all the gaps and inconsistencies merged into a single horrifying narrative.

Her heart kept beating faster and faster. Hermione pressed her hands over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. Her low sobs cut through silence. She kept shaking as she tried to think.

“I’m going to take care of you. I’m always going to take care of you.”

The pain in her mind was growing blinding, as though the past and present where converging and tearing each other apart. She gripped her head. Her brain felt as though it were on fire, her skull cut open, the pressure in her head intensifying and intensifying until she dropped her head down and screamed.

She screamed until she was gasping and then ground her teeth together and tried to keep from hyperventilating. She looked back across the bed again.

Draco was gone.

She sank onto the floor, pressing a hand against her chest. Maybe he hadn’t even been there. She might have just hallucinated him.

Maybe she’d hallucinated it all.

Maybe he was dead, and she was still in her cell dreaming of him. She was just hallucinating that she’d somehow found him in the darkness.

No. It was real. She was certain it was all real. Because it was worse than anything she would have dreamed.

Let's be clear, Mudblood. I don't want you. I never wanted you.

She couldn't understand. Parts made sense, but other parts—

A hand grasped her by the shoulder, and she started violently. Draco had come around the bed and was kneeling beside her.

He studied her, and his eyes flickered as his expression tensed."You're remembering now, aren't you?"

She gave a small nod, and her hand reached up and gripped his wrist. He was really there. She could feel his bones under her fingertips.

"Grang—"

Hermione buried her face against the comforter of the bed and sobbed with relief. The pain in her head was so severe she felt as though her skull were fracturing. She ground her teeth together as she tried not to scream again.

"Oh god—" she forced the words out. Her whole body was trembling.

A thought struck her, and she stilled, her hold tightening.

"The horcrux—the one Umbridge was wearing—was that—was that you?"

There was a silence. "It was."

Her lips trembled, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "Was it—was that the last one?"

"It was." She nodded, and her empty hand spasmed; she gripped the fabric of her robes and tried to make sense of everything.

If he was there, he wasn't dead.

But—if he wasn't dead, that meant he'd never come for her.

She'd waited. And waited. And waited.

And he never came.

"I don't want you. I never wanted you."

Ginny .

Her hold on his wrist slipped away, and her hand fell to the floor as the devastation drowned her relief.

"Why did you kill Ginny—?" Her voice broke.

"Ginny's alive." She turned and stared at him. "Hannah saw her body. Everyone in Hogwarts saw it. Vold— Voldemort said you killed her. You—you told me you killed her."

"Ginny's alive." He met her eyes. "She was pregnant, remember? Her son was born on October

20th, 2003. I'm told he was an exceptionally difficult newborn. She named him James Sirius Potter. You're his godmother."

Hermione gave a low sob, and Draco continued.

"He's a year and half now. You're going to meet him soon. They're waiting for you. You promised Potter you'd take care of them. You have to hold on and get better so you can go."

Her heart rose, a flicker of hope in the darkness and the cold.

"You are aware of how precarious she is. I have gone to considerable expense and effort to maintain her environment."

She dropped her head, her mouth twisting as she trembled and looked away. "I don't believe you."

He made no reply.

"I don't understand—" She squeezed her eyes closed again as she tried to focus through the pain. "I don't understand what happened. I can't remember clearly." She opened her eyes and studied him in the darkness. "But—I remember you."

It was Draco. He was so close. He was looking at her the way he used to look at her. She wanted to catch hold of him and bury herself in his arms, against his chest, to feel his heartbeat.

Her hands spasmed.

She couldn't.

He had killed everyone. He had murdered or executed them all. She felt herself crumbling under the renewed horror and devastation of it.

His expression wavered, and his mouth twitched before he spoke. "What—do you remember about me?"

"You—" she studied his face. He was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, as though carved out of the likeness of the person she'd known.

Her fingers twitched as she fought an urge to reach out and at least touch him. To just know whether he still felt familiar under her fingertips.

He was alive. She'd been so sure he'd died, that he must have died. But he wasn't dead; she could see the pulse at the base of his throat.

"You spied for the Order. When you were hurt, I healed you. You—" she swallowed and looked down at her wrists and scarlet clothing as she tried to remember clearly, "—you used to call for me—and—"

There was a stabbing pain through her head, and she gave an agonised gasp and slumped down.

She blinked, trying to remember what she'd been saying. Her tongue felt fuzzy and wouldn't move properly, as though it had been numbed.

She jerked and tried to move her jaw, but it twitched so violently her teeth made a loud clacking sound. Her left arm and leg gave out, and she started to topple sideways.

Draco caught her.

“Dra—?” Her chest spasmed as she struggled to breathe, and he pulled her firmly against his chest.

He didn’t say anything to her. Instead he gripped her jaw, pried her mouth open, and rapidly upended a potion into her mouth before clamping his hand over her mouth and nose.

She tried to wrench herself away. Panicking. She didn’t know what was happening. Her lungs felt like they might burst as she struggled to breathe. Her body kept jerking of its own volition. Her numb tongue couldn’t taste the potion he’d put in her mouth.

She wasn’t supposed to swallow things if she didn’t know what they were. “Granger,” his voice was calm and close to her ear. “You need to swallow. You’re having a seizure. The potion will stop it, but it takes longer to work if you can’t swallow it.”

Hermione’s throat contracted repeatedly, and her arm spasmed, but Draco refused to ease his grip. After several tries, she managed to make herself swallow.

Her whole body went limp as though she were boneless.

Draco’s hold relaxed, and her head lolled down and rested against his chest. She felt him sigh, and his hand stroke her hair back. He brushed his thumb against her cheek while his other arm supported her body. His hands were warm. He still smelled the same, and it made her want to start crying.

After a moment he shifted and picked her up. She could feel her bones, jutting through her skin as he lifted her and set her back onto the bed.

Her mouth wouldn’t quite work. She stared at him, trying to take in every detail.

He slid a hand under her head and studied her carefully.

Up close, despite the low light, she could see he was visibly exhausted. His skin was pale to the point of being grey. His mouth and eyes were tense.

His pupils were sharply contracted, and his gaze kept flicking across her as though he were trying to make sure he wasn’t overlooking anything. His expression was carefully closed.

“You’ve been unconscious for almost a week,” he said after a minute. “You had a seizure and lost consciousness. The healers weren’t sure—if you’d wake up. Seizures—” she saw his throat contract as he swallowed, and he stopped meeting her eyes, “are not uncommon when dealing with neurological damage caused by concentrated magical activity. You had—several while unconscious, but fortunately none caused any lasting damage to you—or your baby.”

Hermione stopped breathing, and her eyes widened.

The baby. She’d forgotten that she was pregnant.

She was pregnant with his heir. For the breeding program. To force her memories to come back. There was something she was missing, but the pain still overshadowed everything. She tried to think, but reaching towards her memories was mind shattering.

She couldn’t remember—

Her chest started spasming.

“I don’t understand,” she forced the words out. “What happened? Why—why—”

She tried to breathe, and it made a gasping sound in the back of her throat. Her chest started jerking faster and faster. Draco’s fingers under her head tightened in her hair. His expression was open as he stared down at her, his face only inches from hers.

“Grang—Hermione, you need to breathe slowly. Hyperventilating when pregnant can increase your risk of having another seizure.” His eyes were imploring. “Please breathe, Granger.”

Hermione gave a low sob and nodded.

Inhale, to a count of four.

Exhale, slowly to a count of six.

She studied his face. She felt a ravenous desperation as she looked at him, but there was also growing well of hurt. She didn’t know how to reconcile the person she knew with the person she’d spent six months imprisoned by.

As her breathing slowed, tears began sliding in cold trails down her temples.

Draco’s gaze dropped away from her face, and he withdrew his hand and straightened.

He looked down at her, hesitating, his hand curled into a fist at his side. “I’m sorry. Severus and I thought we’d have you out before February. I didn’t think you’d be here for so long.”

She bit her lip and tried to think of what to ask him. What happened? Why didn’t you come? Why did you hurt me? Why did you rape me?

Why did you become the High Reeve?

“Why—” she gave a low sob, “Why did you kill everyone?”

His eyes flickered, and his jaw twitched as he straightened and looked away from her. “I was trying to find you.”

Her heart stalled with a mixture of horror and relief.

“You—looked for me?” Her voice was shaking.

He looked back at her. “Of course I looked for you. I looked everywhere for you. Did you think I left you there?”

She blinked and tried to remember clearly, reaching towards the back of her mind and grasping at the memories she could sense there.

“When you never came I thought maybe—” as she pushed into her recollection, the pain in her head suddenly sharpened, and her vision wavered. She bit down on her lip and tried not to black out. “I thought you must have died.” Her eyes burned, and her voice shook and faded away. She lifted her arm and stared at the manacle locked around her wrist. “I—I lost my occlumency when my magic was suppressed. They said Voldemort was going to interrogate me. I was afraid if I thought about you—that he might find you in my mind. I was trying to protect you. But”—her voice grew smaller—“sometimes I thought if I held on, eventually you might come. Then, when you didn’t, I thought you must have died.”

Draco looked as though she'd gutted him. His hand twitched and reached towards her.

"Fancy an outing, Mudblood?. . .The Dark Lord is eager to see you." He gripped her by the arm before she could back away.

The visceral terror of the memory swallowed her. Her breath caught in her throat, and she tensed as he got closer.

His hand closed and dropped to his side as he looked away. "I looked for you as soon as I returned and found you gone. The Warden—Umbridge didn't file you as a prisoner in Hogwarts. There were no records of you beyond the transfer paperwork when you were captured. Severus and I both submitted requests trying to locate you, but every time we did, we were told there was no file or record of a prisoner with that name or number. You'd just vanished. Everyone at the Hogwarts celebration was either drunk or shell-shocked, there were few clear memories of you being there. I volunteered to track down anyone missing in the hope of it giving me a chance to find you." The muscles in his jaw twitched. "I had to bring them all back. If I'd failed, the job would have been reassigned."

He stared up at the ceiling; his expression was drawn.

"I tried everything to find you. I searched the prisons. I went through all the existing cell blocks in Hogwarts. I went through every prisoner file. I made a genetic trace spell. It found your aunt and cousins. I followed it all the way to Australia and found your parents where you'd hidden them."

Hermione flinched and stared at him wide-eyed.

Draco looked down, and his lips thinned when he saw her expression. "They're all fine, I didn't harm them."

His head tilted slightly to the side, and his jaw clenched as he swallowed. "I even tried scrying you several times, but—" he flicked his hand dismissively, "—nothing. It didn't occur to me that it was because you were being kept imprisoned without any light or sound. I assumed it meant that wherever you were was entirely undetectable. I travelled all over Europe. Death Eaters and allies with certain—reputations. It had happened a few times before. When I couldn't find you anywhere, I assumed that was what had happened to you. I thought it must be why you'd vanished."

He looked away again. "Severus and I did everything we could think of but bring you up as a person of interest to the Dark Lord himself. I thought as long as the Dark Lord was preoccupied with his obsession with immortality, I'd have a better chance of finding you and getting you away. Then, when there was talk of using the prisoners as surrogates for a breeding program, Montague went to the Dark Lord and proposed that you be the face of the repopulation program, bait for any remaining Resistance allies, and a final mockery of Potter all in one. He'd been looking for you ever since he'd gotten his mark, and I'd—left him be; I thought at some point he might find something I was overlooking. However you still didn't exist within the prison system. It wasn't until the Dark Lord personally demanded you by name that Umbridge admitted she'd had you the whole time."

Hermione didn't know what there was to say.

"I—" Draco started to speak again. His jaw shook visibly and then locked, and he didn't say anything else.

There was a long silence.

“Why didn’t you assume I was dead?” Hermione finally managed to ask.

The corner of his mouth twitched, and Draco raised his right hand into her line of sight. The onyx ring showed dimly in the low light.

Hermione stared for several seconds before looking in confusion at her own hands. There was nothing there, but she felt a sense of certainty that there somehow should be. As she stared, her index finger on her left hand distorted and shimmered, the black ring suddenly visible.

Her throat felt thick, and she swallowed several times before she could speak. “I—I forgot it was there.”

“After you were cursed and nearly died going to Surrey, I added a life signature monitor to your ring. I‘d wanted to add a trace, but they’re detectable, and could have been intercepted. I thought, with a basic charm, at least I’d know if you died. So—I knew you were alive.” He dropped his hand out of sight once again. “Although it did stop at one point, immediately after I’d sent a signal. I thought I may have caused whomever was keeping you to notice it. When it reactivated several days later, I didn’t think I could risk signaling again. I wasn’t certain whether it was still you wearing it, but I thought it meant you might still be alive. So I kept looking.”

He looked away, and the movement drew Hermione’s gaze from the ring on her hand.

He looked ground down, like a weapon that had been honed in excess. There was a deadly over-precision about him that she could suddenly see.

His fingers twitched, and he closed them. “I would have gotten you out sooner, but Severus was already in Romania when you were transferred to the manor. It was supposed to be only three months, but the Dark Lord keeps extending the assignation there. As long as you were being brought in to have your memories examined by the Dark Lord—there were—I couldn’t do anything that would have indicated—anything.”

Hermione’s stomach dropped as though the bed had vanished beneath her. Of course. Voldemort had watched everything. Her every interaction with Draco. He’d been overtly, sadistically curious in his brutal bi-monthly examinations of her mind. Draco had been performing for Voldemort through Hermione’s eyes.

The realisation felt like her tenuous hold on reality was abruptly inverted, and she was free falling.

What was real then? Any of it? None of it.

She tried to think, but it was still difficult to focus through the pain in her mind. She could barely keep her eyes open. She was exhausted and so hungry. She couldn’t remember when she’d last eaten. Her head hurt with such intense pressure she expected to find blood seeping from her eyes and nose.

She wanted to close her eyes, but she was terrified that if she lost consciousness, it would all slip away, and she’d forget. The past would vanish into the darkness, Draco would fade away, and when she woke, it would be Malfoy again.

But there weren’t two people. There had only ever been the one. Draco was buried somewhere

under all the layers of cold.

She didn't know what was supposed to happen. She didn't know what any of it meant. Even if he'd been acting, not everyone else had been. All the stories about him in The Daily Prophet, and from the other women in the breeding program before Hermione was sent to Malfoy Manor.

"Hannah said you hung Ginny's body in the Great Hall—"

"It wasn't Ginny." His voice was flat. "When I couldn't find you at Hogwarts—I initially thought there may have been a mistake and it wasn't you caught and transferred. I looked for you in the rubble at Sussex." He looked down. "There was witch who'd survived the explosion. She'd made it beyond the wards and into the Ashdown Forest, one of the only survivors. She was nearly dead from the experimentation and the explosion. But she had red hair. When I brought the body with me to Hogwarts, the prisoners assumed it was Ginny with Spattergroit. No one had seen her in months, they assumed the disfigurement was due to the disease."

Her heart skipped a beat, and she felt almost afraid to breathe. "McGonagall…Nev—"

Draco's expression tensed, his jaw twitched and then set. "I couldn't hide them, even if Severus had been willing to entertain the idea. After what the Crouches had done to smuggle Barty Jr out of Azkaban, the Dark Lord required that every body be extensively examined for interference. They were all verified." He looked away. "I made it quick for them."

An icy sense of despair washed over her. She curled into a ball on her side. She could feel herself fading with pained exhaustion.

"Go to sleep. I'll tell you whatever else you want to know tomorrow."

She forced her eyes open.

"But what if I forget again?" Her voice was small—childish and nearly trembling with fear. He didn't say anything. She wanted to reach towards him and reassure herself once again that he really was there. Real. Warm. Touchable.

Her hand twitched, but the potion had left her almost paralyzed.

"Will—will you go back to being the way you were if I forget you?"

"As long as you're pregnant, you're safe. It doesn't matter if you remember, Severus and I will get you out."

"Then what?"

Draco said nothing. The room seemed darker. She could barely make out Draco's silhouette. "Then what happens?" she forced out.

"Then you'll go take care of Ginny the way you promised Potter you would."

That wasn't the question she'd been asking, but she didn't have the strength to ask again.

When she woke again, Draco was gone.

The pain in her head had eased somewhat. Topsy appeared with broth and potions, which she entreated Hermione to try to keep down.

Hermione swallowed a foul smelling nutritional potion and held herself rigidly while her body convulsed and tried to force it back up.

When her throat stopped contracting, she stared at Topsy.

“I knew you.” It felt like a nail was being driven into the base of her skull. She winced. “I saw you before—didn’t I?”

Topsy gave a tentative nod. “The Master is saying yous shouldn’t be forcing the memories.”

Hermione tucked her chin down against her shoulder. His absence clawed at her. “When does he come back?”

“He is been being in this room since you is having the first seizure. He is having many things he is needing to do now.”

Hermione swallowed, and her fingers twitched repeatedly. She could feel her chest tightening. What if he didn’t come back? What if he died? What would she do if he died?

She could feel her hands trembling. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to focus on something else.

“Did he get behind on his executions?” she forced herself to ask in a dry voice.

The question was sarcastic, but Topsy nodded seriously. Hermione released a low breath and curled into a tight ball around her stomach.

Topsy vanished a few seconds later.

Hermione spent the day replaying the past six months. Taking note of all the details she’d missed. The familiar traits and tells that she had forgotten about Draco.

He’d known her. He’d known her when she arrived. When she’d been scheming to kill him. When he’d raped her.

It wasn’t surprising that he hadn’t wanted her to look at him when it happened.

She was pregnant, with his heir. Her baby.

Their baby.

He’d raped her, and now she was pregnant.

When she thought about it, her stomach twisted, and her throat contracted, and she vomited violently off the side of the bed. She slumped down and covered her face with her hands as she tried not to cry or hyperventilate. Topsy appeared to banish the mess and gave Hermione a glass of water.

Hermione tried to stop thinking about it. She tried to just focus on Draco and not think about the fact that she’d been raped, that she was pregnant, that Draco didn’t refer to the baby as being his, and she didn’t know what that meant.

He wasn’t there to ask, even if she thought she could manage the conversation.

She just tried not to think about it.

Instead, she tried to untangle Draco. She knew that she knew him, as though he’d been branded into

her. But she couldn't recall concrete memories, it was more a general sense of knowing him. Instinctively, she knew him. She remembered the way he looked, the ways he moved, how he restrained himself, how the colours in his eyes betrayed his carefully hidden emotions.

When she tried to reach further into the past, before her imprisonment, it caused an agonizing pain to start bleeding across the base of her skull until she was afraid she'd cause herself to have another seizure if she pushed.

She couldn't think about it.

She had to simply accept that it was there.

She lay in bed, trying to reconcile herself with the version of Hermione that had faded away in the darkness of Hogwarts. Someone who had fought. Who'd levelled half a lab. Who had burned dementors and stabbed Graham Montague with a set of poisoned knives.

Someone who Draco had been in love with. That he would have walked to the ends of the earth to protect.

She didn't know if that person existed anymore. If he expected that version of herself to come back along with her memories.

She felt as though that Hermione had died along with all the rest of the Order of the Phoenix.

All that was left was a shadow.

It was late night and moonless when the air in her room shifted. She turned and stared carefully into the darkness, after a moment Draco emerged. He was wearing his Death Eater uniform. She could feel the Dark Magic almost dripping from him. The sight and sensation made her chest tighten.

His expression was intent. And cold.

"Are you angry at me about something?" she asked after several minutes.

He froze for a moment and then blinked. "No."

He waved his wand, and a sconce on the wall emitted a soft yellow light. He tilted his head to the side until his neck cracked sharply and then pulled off his outer robes and hung them over the back of the chair. The body-armor strapped to his torso shimmered in the light.

Hermione studied him, trying to pinpoint what it was about him that was different. "You seem like you're angry at me. I feel like I know that you are, but—I can't remember why." He looked away from her, staring across the room. "It hardly matters. It's all in the past."

His voice was familiar. Clipped.

"If the past doesn't matter, why did you look for me?"

He looked back at her. "Do you remember why you were captured?"

She nodded. "I blew up Sussex."

"Do you remember why?"

She furrowed her eyebrows and tried to think of the answer without trying to reach her occluded

memories. “It was because of you, wasn’t it?”

He gave a short nod.

She closed her eyes. “When you’d sleep. I used to promise you I’d take care of you. That I’d always take care of you.” He gave a low laugh; it was almost a scoff. “That’s what I said, actually.”

The corner of her mouth quirked upwards, but the centre of her chest ached. “I always said it back to you. Maybe you just didn’t know.”

She wanted to reach towards him, but when she opened her eyes, he’d turned away from her. He was staring at the portrait across the room.

He said nothing in reply.

“What’s the plan?” she finally asked. “What’s the strategy behind all this? Are you able to tell me now that I’m”—her tongue twisted as she forced out the next word—“pregnant?”

Draco shrugged and glanced around the room. “It’s Severus’ plan. When the Dark Lord realised he was several horcruxes short following the Final Battle, he handed a considerable amount of the political maneuvering over to Severus. He’s been undermining and destabilizing the regime since the Order fell. The situation across the continent is precarious. The Dark Lord’s poor health has caused him to break most of his promises and commitments made during the war to the dark beings and allied countries. He’s barely maintaining his hold. MACUSA has begun pressuring the International Confederation, they’re signaling their intention of stepping in if things in Europe continue to deteriorate. It’s arranged now—the regime will collapse soon, and when it does, the International Confederation will step in to restore order.”

“You’ve found a way to defeat Voldemort?”

His mouth curved into a faint smirk. His eyes were pale silver as he stared at her and nodded. “We did. We’re waiting for the ideal moment. It’ll likely be after the second anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts.”

There was a sense of certainty in his voice. Hermione felt herself brighten, as she tried to calculate how exactly they might go about it, reviewing everything she’d read in the papers, trying to guess.

“What—”

“You will be out of Europe before it starts,” he said in a hard voice, cutting her off. “You just need to be well enough to travel. So—eat. That would be more helpful than anything else.” She shriveled internally with disappointment, but once he left, she furrowed her eyebrows and stared into the dark, trying to piece everything together; turning Draco over and over in her mind.

The next day the pain was worse; she couldn’t bear having any light in the room. She couldn’t keep anything down. Draco was gone again. She tried to be calm, but when Topsy wouldn’t say when he’d come back or what he was doing, she started to panic.

If he never came back, she’d never get to talk to him again. Never touch him. There were things she needed to tell him, she just wasn’t sure how to say them yet. What if he died? What if he got hurt and she couldn’t heal him because she didn’t have magic anymore?

She kept hyperventilating and had several small seizures. Topsy appeared instantly each time with a potion in hand.

After the sixth seizure, Hermione was in too much pain to do anything but lie limp in bed, barely conscious of anything but the grinding agony in her head. She lay curled on her side as the hours crawled past and wished she'd lose consciousness so she wouldn't have to feel it all.

The mattress dipped, and a cool hand brushed back the curls clinging to her feverish skin, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

A minute later her left hand was picked up, and long fingers entwined with hers. She felt Draco's thumb brush across her knuckles and slide over the ring she was still wearing.

Her jaw trembled, and her eyes burned even though they were closed. She squeezed his hand in hers as tightly as she could.

He didn't say anything, but he stayed as long as she was conscious. When she woke again, he was still there, sitting in the darkened room, holding her hand.

His fingers spasmed occasionally.

Over the next several days, the pain in her head gradually lessened; enough to be manageable. She started eating, sitting up in bed, reviewing her Pregnancy Guide and reading the Daily Prophet.

As the pain faded, her memory improved. The overarching space was still vague and indistinct, but certain moments would suddenly return to her in stunning clarity as though she were reliving them.

"You are not replaceable. You are not required to make your death convenient. You are allowed to be important to people. The reason I took that fucking Vow was to keep you alive. To keep you safe."

As she recovered, Draco withdrew. At first she thought she was imagining it. As her recollection of him improved, she thought perhaps it was simply the contrast of their past that made him seem more distant. But as the days slipped by, she realised with a sinking heart that he was moving further and further away.

When she'd been nearly catatonic with pain, he'd sat beside her, smoothing her hair and holding her hands in his, trying to heal the tremors in her fingers. But as she grew more wakeful and started trying to talk to him, he touched her less. He moved further down the bed until he sat watching her from the foot of it. He stood by the window. He clasped his hands behind his back when she spoke to him. He gave short answers when she asked him questions. He was still there, but further and further away. When she looked up and found him watching her, he looked away, his expression resigned. And bitter.

She didn't know where to begin.

She tried to remember how she'd been before. She'd memorised him, but not herself. Did she speak differently before? She didn't quite remember what that person had been like.

She'd been talkative. People had always told her she talked too much.

She couldn't think of anything to say that she thought she could talk about. What could she say

about anything?

Was she supposed to tell him what kinds of flowers bloomed on the estate? Or about how to build a card tower? Or ask him if he knew how to fold an origami crane because she couldn't remember anymore?

It was all trivial.

Everything that mattered felt too devastating to put into words. She was afraid if she started, she'd hyperventilate and have a seizure. And if Draco thought he upset her, maybe he wouldn't come see her, and she'd just be all alone again.

She'd thought in her cell that she'd held on, but in the cold light of day she found that she hadn't.

She'd broken.

There were only pieces of her left.

She sat in bed and nervously watched him as he stood by the window staring at the hedge maze.

She kept parting her lips to speak and then hesitated. She looked down as her hands and tried again.

"How—have you been?" she asked.

It was an asinine question. She blushed and wanted to take it back the moment it was uttered.

He didn't even look at her. "I'm fine."

She swallowed and felt as though her heart was breaking. She straightened the flat sheet and brushed several wrinkles from the coverlet.

He was standing so far away, and she didn't know what to say to him.

"So…" she finally said, "you're married now." His shoulders went rigid, but he didn't respond for several seconds. When he turned and looked at her, his expression was a mask.

"Two years this October."

She tried to meet his eyes, but after only a moment she looked down at her lap. She felt as though there was a chasm in her chest.

She didn't think there had ever been any kind of commitment on his end. Whatever they'd been had never been defined that she could recall. It wasn't as though she'd ever thought he'd marry her.

But he was married, and it felt significant to her even if she couldn't articulate why. Why, in light of everything else, did it feel like it mattered at all?

He'd had to rape her thirty times. She was his prisoner. She was pregnant with his heir. But she was sitting in bed obsessing over the fact he was married, because everything else felt impossible to even begin trying come to terms with.

He'd gotten married three months after the Final Battle.

He had a wife.

Dainty, pretty, unfaithful, unstable Astoria.

“I was ordered to marry. If it hadn’t been Astoria, it would have been someone else.” He said it in a flat voice.

It was a fact.

“I was commanded to marry her therefore I married her.”

Hermione bit down on the inside of her lower lip and nodded, still staring down at her lap.

A marriage arranged by Voldemort for the postwar repopulation effort. To make a spectacle of the Death Eaters and distract from Voldemort’s fading health.

She understood the context.

She didn’t know what to say about it. She didn’t know what to say about anything. She wanted the past to vanish so she could reach out towards Draco without feeling that her heart was being mangled.

She wanted to touch him. Kiss him. To feel his hands caressing her. To remember what it felt like to be warm and wanted. To know if he’d still whisper “mine” against her skin.

But she felt broken. She wasn’t the person he used to kiss. She was afraid if he touched her and it wasn’t the same, it would poison all the past memories, and then there would be nothing left to hold on to. He wasn’t the same either. His eyes were filled with guilt and bitter rage.

He was angry at her.

He hid it, but she could feel it in the pit of her stomach. He didn’t feel like he ever intended to forgive her for whatever it was.

After a minute she looked up. “Did you do something to her to make her barren?”

A cruel smirk twisted at the edge of his mouth. “I would have, but I didn’t need to. The Greengrasses failed to disclose that they carry a blood curse. It would require considerable effort for her to conceive, and the manor had some unfortunate side effects. It didn’t occur to her that some rooms are locked for a reason, or that she should restore the existing wards after she stripped the manor down to redecorate.” Then the sneer faded, his expression grew reserved, and he looked away from her. “I didn’t think she’d ever go so far as to attack you.” Hermione stared down at her wrists. The copper plating of the manacles was still as bright as it had been when they’d first been placed around her wrists. *Property of the High Reeve.*

She turned the metal so that the engraved words were no longer visible and then looked up again. “Will you be the one who takes me to Ginny?”

He shook his head. “Severus. There are restrictions on my ability to travel currently. Sentimentality is hardly a reason to endanger a safe house. He’ll take you—or rather you’ll take him with you—in order to assure he doesn’t violate the terms of his Unbreakable Vow.”

Hermione furrowed her eyebrows. “His Unbreakable Vow?”

Draco’s eyes flickered, and his mouth pressed into a flat line.

“At the end of the war, he made one with me, vowing not to interfere in my protection of you or to take you anywhere that you might be endangered. It was intended to ensure you left Europe safely, but it didn’t end up mattering. You went by yourself and were captured anyway.” He glanced away. “The trip should be safe, but it’s best to make contingency plans when possible.”

She twisted the hem of the cotton flat sheet between her fingers. “Will I see you after that?”

Draco quirked an eyebrow, and his mouth slowly curved into a cat-like smile. “Ginny doesn’t particularly care for me.”

Hermione just kept studying him.

He shrugged. “It will depend on how things go. With luck I won’t be in Europe for long afterwards.”

“Oh.”

Talking to him was exhausting. It felt as though there were countless details she needed to take note of, things that she should understand, that he was telling her, but she didn’t know how to interpret them properly any longer.

We’re supposed to run away together. You promised.

“You’ll come—eventually?” Her voice was hopeful.

If they had time, they could pick up the pieces. She could find him under the mask of the High Reeve. Perhaps slowly she could find a way to become Hermione once more. For him, she would try to find that person again.

Then maybe he would stop standing so far away.

His quicksilver eyes glittered for a moment, and the corner of his mouth turned up; a shadow of a smirk. “If that’s what you want.”

It felt like a lie.

A little more than a week after she regained consciousness she got out of bed and went slowly down the hall to take a shower. Topsy and the portrait followed her every step of the way. Hermione sat on the floor of the shower, her head on her knees while the water flowed over her. Her hands and legs were trembling with exhaustion. When she got out of the shower, she just wrapped a towel around herself and then collapsed on the bed of the attached bedroom. When she woke, Draco was seated in the chair nearby, reading. She looked at him for several minutes before he glanced up and noticed she was awake.

His expression was open for an instant as their eyes met, and she could feel the heat of it down her spine. Then it shuttered.

He snapped the book closed, and it vanished. “Do you want to change rooms?”

She pulled the towel more tightly around herself. “I was just too tired to walk back.”

He eyed her for a moment. “You can change rooms. I’ll just need a few days to get the wards in place here.”

“Astoria might notice.”

His lip curled. “She’s not permitted in this wing of the house any longer. Even if she were, she’s in France for the next month, buying a new wardrobe.”

Hearing that Astoria was not lurking in the manor unknotted an anxious tension in the pit of Hermione’s stomach.

She stared up at the canopy overhead. “There’s no need.”

From the corner of her eye she saw Draco shift and his expression harden. There was something he was trying to communicate to her, but she was too tired to try to guess what it was. Her head hurt too much, and her entire body was aching from the exertion of walking down the hallway.

She looked across the room at the portrait. The blonde witch was in frame picking flowers in an Impressionist style garden.

“Is that your mother?”

The portrait stilled and looked up.

“Why do you ask?” Draco’s voice was suspiciously casual.

Hermione shrugged a shoulder. “You have her mouth. It’s different from the Malfoy features that your father and most of the portraits have.”

“She had it painted to keep my father company when he left Hogwarts. He graduated the year before she did,” Draco said, staring across the room at the portrait. “Due to the circumstances of her death, none of the later portraits ever woke.”

He looked away. “You should sleep in your room. It’s safer there.” He seemed to hesitate for a moment. “Can you walk?”

Hermione stared at him and wondered what he’d do if she said no. Levitate her? Carry her?

Tell her to sleep on the floor?

She blinked. No. That was before; when she’d first arrived.

“I can walk.” She pushed herself up and realised she’d forgotten to bring new robes with her and only had a towel. She gripped it tightly around herself and avoided looking at Draco as she slipped off the bed. When she glanced over, she found he was staring pointedly away from her and holding his cloak out towards her. She stared for only a moment before taking it and pulling it over her shoulders.

The towel dropped to the floor, but she didn’t try to pick it up. The house-elves could banish it from the floor as easily as the bed. If she knelt down, she was afraid her muscle atrophy would result in her staying there.

She walked to the door without looking at Draco; the fabric dragging across the wood floor. Draco was only a few steps behind her, she could feel him, but his footsteps were silent, and that fact set her on edge.

“What kinds of wards do you have on my room?”

She could sense the way Draco grew colder at the question.

“Only a few.” Lie.

“You’ve got a lot of protective wards on this room, Malfoy.”

She thought back to how he’d been outside her room immediately after the New Year’s Party and sent her to bed.

“With all the wards Malfoy added to your wing in the manor, I was afraid I’d never reach you again.”

The explosion necessary for Astoria to get through the door.

His haste to get her back to her room after she’d tried to throw herself over the balcony. How he’d insisted on coming to her room when she was fertile.

It was always an intense relief when she returned to it. She’d always been able to stay calm and clear-headed in her room, until she’d become pregnant and her anxiety had finally exceeded whatever enchantments he’d imbued it with.

“I have gone to considerable expense and effort to maintain her environment.”

He’d probably been being honest with Stroud.

She tried to walk quickly. It was only four doors down the hall to her room, but she felt as though her legs were already on the verge of giving out as she passed the second door. She stumbled.

Draco instantly caught her left elbow, and she froze. Her stomach plummeted so sharply that she gasped and felt her chest contract until she couldn’t breathe. She reached desperately for the wall until her fingertips brushed it. She pressed her body tightly against it and struggled to inhale.

Draco’s hand withdrew as though burned, and her heart shattered. She suddenly felt the stark, cruel reality of everything, and it was like being crushed to death.

“I just—,” her voice shook and then broke. “I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be alright with what happened. I don’t know how to try to come to terms with it.” Her shoulders were shaking, and she pressed her forehead against the wall.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to fix this. Draco, why did this happen to us? How is it ever going to be alright now?” Her voice was trembling, and she gave a low sob and then burst into tears, sliding down the wall to the floor.

“I don’t know how to do this.” She kept saying it over and over as she pressed herself against the wall and cried.

Chapter 2

June 2005

She pressed her hands over her mouth as she kept crying and crying.

Draco didn't touch her. When her sobbing finally slowed, she sat slumped against the wall, her shoulders still shaking.

She heard him inhale slowly.

"You don't need to do anything. I'm not expecting anything of you," he finally said in a quiet voice. "I won't approach again. Wait here, I'll call Topsy."

He shifted and turned, but her hand shot out, and she grabbed the hem of his robes. "No. No, don't leave."

Her hand shook, but she didn't let go.

"Don't go. I don't want you to go."

He stood beside her while she tangled her fingers in the fabric and kept leaning against the wall.

It took her half an hour before she could stand up and walk the rest of the way to her room. She paused in the doorway, her chest still hitching.

"How many wards?"

He was silent for several seconds.

"About eighty now."

She made it across the room and dropped on her side onto the bed, burying her face in the fabric of his cloak. It smelled like him. Cedar, oakmoss, and papyrus.

He pulled the coverlet up over her shoulder. She caught hold of his hand and gripped it. His skin was as warm as she remembered it. She pulled his hand against her jaw, her eyes tightly closed, and gripped it for several minutes.

She slowly let go of him. "You have to come see me so I know you're alright. Otherwise—I'll worry."

The next day Topsy brought a strengthening potion. Hermione walked slowly around her room and then into the hallway, trailing her fingers along the wall.

Her head hurt less than it had in over a month, and her memories of Draco were growing clearer. They still felt distant, as though she were viewing them through a telescope in the back of her mind. The gaps in her recollection slowly closed. She remembered Severus' Unbreakable Vow and how she'd managed to trick Draco into leaving for long enough for her to go to Sussex.

It was increasingly clear why he'd been so paranoid about inspecting all her memories and ensuring in exhaustive detail that he knew precisely what schemes she had. She'd tricked him once; as

Severus had said, Draco never intended to trust her again.

The realisation felt like an additional weight in her chest.

He wasn't using legilimency on her, but he still skimmed her mind using the manacles. He kept her under constant supervision.

He was still lying to her.

She'd suspected it for days, but now that she was able to think coherently, she was certain. She thought it was partly to keep her calm and partly to manage her.

She mulled it over, trying to sense the holes in the new, carefully crafted narrative he'd started feeding her since she'd regained consciousness. Where were the gaps? What were the inconsistencies?

She sat down on the bottom step at the staircase landing, deep in thought.

She heard footsteps, intentionally audible footsteps, and looked up as Draco came around the corner. His expression was carefully closed.

She stared at him. He was in wizarding robes, all black. Since she'd arrived at the manor she'd never seen him in anything but black. He looked as though he expected to have his picture taken.

Ever since he'd been announced as identity behind the High Reeve, the papers had grown rabid in their curiosity and coverage of him. Voldemort's protege. He made appearances at the Ministry, at fundraisers, abroad...

He was traveling frequently. Short trips, usually less than a day, with a noticeable escort.

Draco stood at the landing, looking at her. She'd wrapped his cloak around her shoulders before venturing into the hallway, and his eyes flickered when he noted it. He stared at her for several seconds as though he were re-memorising her.

She studied him in the same way, trying to understand the new version of him.

"I thought you were out," she said when the silence grew oppressive. "My plans until noon were cancelled." He was studying her carefully, his eyes flicking down to her feet and her hands. "Are you strong enough to walk? I wanted to show you something."

Hermione swallowed. "How far is it?"

"The closer side of the main wing."

Hermione hesitated and then stood, her curiosity piqued. "I think I can walk that far."

He maintained a conscientious distance from her as they walked slowly through the manor. It should have been only a ten minute walk, but it took well over half an hour. He made a convincing job of walking at a glacial speed and didn't say anything when she had to pause along the way and shrank towards the walls when the hallways widened and grew larger.

She studied him the whole way, noting the edge, the precision. He was carefully exacting to an extent that he hadn't been before. It was his runes, she realised with slow horror. They'd carved him away. They'd ground him down and reduced him until there was nothing to interfere with them.

Unhesitating, cunning, unfailing, ruthless, and unyielding; driven to succeed.

He'd spent sixteen months trying to find her. He'd hunted for her across Europe, all the way to Australia. He'd used genetic traces, repeatedly, despite the fact they were enough Dark Magic to occasionally kill wizards.

He'd known she was somewhere. He'd let himself disappear in the process.

She and Draco came to a stop outside a familiar set of doors. A doorway that had always been locked to Hermione as long as she'd been in the manor.

There was a fluttering sensation in her chest as she recognised where they were.

Her throat tightened, and she looked down, biting her lip. "I can't touch your books anymore; they're hexed," she said.

"I had the elves restore them all."

Hermione looked up sharply.

He was looking at the doors. "I intended to bring you sooner, but you were bedridden."

"Astoria—"

"I'll deal with her if, and when, she comes back. You can come here as much as you want or take books back to your room or somewhere else if you prefer. The house-elves will transport them."

He opened the door to the library and stood back to let her enter. Hermione peeked inside, taking a hesitant step forward until she stood in the doorway, and drawing a slow, deep breath as she took it in. It was the same. The same library she'd visited two years before, brimming with books she'd longed to read.

She'd been so bored for so long, and here it was, and she could touch them, read them—

She stepped eagerly forward—

Into the cavernous room.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled, causing her to look upwards. The ceiling was shrouded in darkness. It was so high up she couldn't make it out. As she tried to see it, her throat tightened and her fingers twitched.

She felt as though she were shrinking. The room was enormous, the ceiling and walls and shelves stretching up higher and higher...

She was small, and the room was so very big. She was pregnant. She wasn't able to use magic, and she wasn't allowed to defend herself. She couldn't panic, or she might hurt the baby.

Her chest contracted painfully as through there were iron bands clamped around her ribs and crushing her.

She inhaled very slowly through her nose. It was just a library. She'd been there before with Draco. Topsy would be nearby.

"I have to go now." Draco's voice cut through her thoughts.

He'd been watching her stand in the doorway for several minutes.

He glanced into the library. "You don't have to worry. I re-warded the room, and the estate won't allow anyone to enter while I'm gone."

Hermione wavered a moment longer and then stepped away from the door.

"Maybe—we can come back later."

Draco stared at her, his eyes running over her in a rapid catalogue. Hermione reached out and rested her fingertips in the wall, feeling the wallpaper as she nervously wet her lips.

She tilted her head to the side with a quick jerk. "The—the ceiling is very high. I had forgotten—that the ceiling was so high. I didn't notice that—before." She looked down at her shoes, and her fingers spasmed, causing her nails to scratch audibly across the wall. "I might —I don't—"

Her words stalled as she struggled to articulate it.

Draco's eyes flickered, and his hand moved towards her. "Hermione—" Her chest and throat contracted, and she twitched, moving incrementally closer to the wall.

His hand dropped.

Hermione pressed her right shoulder against the wall and then crossed her left hand to rest it against the wall too, dropping her chin down.

"I know being afraid because a room has a high ceiling is illogical," her voice was shaking. "I'm trying. I know. I know—I'm trying—I am trying—but—"

Draco stepped away. Her stomach dropped, and her fingers twitched against the wall again.

Too far.

Too close.

Too far.

Draco looked down at the floor near her feet. "You aren't required to do anything you don't want. I should have realised the ceiling might be an issue. When I get back, we can set up a smaller room with the ones you want. If there are books or any subjects that you want today, the house-elves can bring them to you; as many as you want. I'll walk you back."

Her legs were trembling with exhaustion. "No. You should go. I'm getting tired. You'll be late if you walk me all the way back."

He released a breath, giving a short nod. "Right."

He started to turn away.

Hermione reached towards him and then withdrew her hand. "Draco—" He stopped and turned to look back at her. She swallowed and managed a wan smile.

"Be careful, Draco. Don't die."

He froze.

There was a pause as they both stood looking at each other.

Then the corner of his mouth quirked with a ghost of a smile. "Right."

He stared at her a moment longer and then vanished silently.

Hermione stood, tracing her fingers along the faint texture of the wallpaper in the hallway. She felt so tired she was tempted to slide down the wall and lie on the floor.

She drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders before she slowly turned to make her way back to the North Wing, turning everything over in her mind. It was past nightfall. Hermione was seated in her chair, staring out the window and studying the hedge maze, when she felt the air shift. She turned and found Draco standing at the door.

"You didn't ask for any books." He was studying her carefully.

She shook her head. "I've been thinking."

She saw his eyes flicker and his expression grow more reserved.

"When I think about it, there are things that don't add up for me."

"Not all of us have your dazzling intellect." His tone was light. He hadn't moved from the door. Hermione studied the space between them and bit her lip as she hesitated.

"Today, you didn't say you'd always come for me. You used to say that to me before you left. Whenever—" she looked down and wrapped the hem of his cloak tightly around her fingers so they wouldn't twitch visibly. She furrowed her eyebrows, trying to recall a clear memory of it, but unable manage. A bleeding pain started to spread up from the base of her head. She gave up and looked back at Draco again. "I think—I think I remember that. Whenever you had to go, you'd promise to come for me. Didn't—you?"

Draco froze for a split second. Then he blinked, and his mouth twisted into a bitter smile as he looked away. "Well—I thought it was a rather empty-sounding promise at this point."

Her throat caught, and her hand started to move towards him. "You looked everywhere. That wasn't your fault."

He gave a short, barking laugh and stepped back as though struck. The abrupt sound made Hermione start.

He stared at her for a moment, and then his eyebrows arched upwards.

"Right," he said slowly. "Everywhere. I looked everywhere." He rolled his jaw as though he were feeling the shape of the word inside his mouth. "Except the one place that mattered— where you were—but everywhere else, certainly. I suppose I deserve credit for my effort if nothing else."

There was something cruelly familiar in the relentless intensity he spoke with. Her stomach curdled. "*Poor little healer, with no one to take care of. No one who needs you, or wants you."*

She couldn't remember when he'd said it. Was it a memory from during the war? No, after— in the Manor.

Draco gave another laugh, and it startled her from her reverie.

She stared at him. His expression was twisted. "—not my fault?" he was saying. The words were so clipped it was as though he were biting off the end of every one of them. "Is that how I should think about it all? That nothing is ever my fault? Not my mother. Not Dumbledore—or really anyone I've ever killed. If I rationalise enough, I had no choice in any of it, did I? What about you? Is what's happened to you not my fault either? Should I blame you instead? Or the Dark Lord? Or perhaps the world in general?"

He was breathing through his teeth, the words pouring out of him.

Then he seemed to abruptly catch himself. His mouth snapped shut, and he just stared at her for several seconds.

"If Potter hadn't mattered, you wouldn't have either."

Hermione blinked away the memory, her heart in her throat when she tried to swallow.

Draco sneered and laid a pale hand over his heart. "Would embracing eternal victimhood somehow make me feel better?"

His voice, beneath the caustic tone of sarcasm, was vibrating with suppressed rage.

Hermione looked down at her lap, breathing in slowly through clenched teeth. Her fingers kept trying to spasm nervously. Her whole body was tense as she tried to stay focused.

There were so many things she was trying not to think about or panic over that, it was like trying to keep her face above the surface before she drowned in the morass of her mind.

Her memories wouldn't come back with any kind of clear order. She had hundreds of memories of Draco, but she couldn't tell exactly what sequence they were supposed to go in. They were distant blurs and then flashes of clarity; things she knew but couldn't quite pull together into anything sufficiently cohesive.

Instinctively, she felt certain there was something more to what was happening and Draco was hiding it from her; something he didn't want her to know. If she just knew him better—if she could remember more clearly—she'd know what it was, but she couldn't pull it together clearly enough.

"That's not my point. I'm not—trying to talk about that yet," she finally said after spending several seconds trying to focus herself. "The part I don't understand is if everyone in the Order is dead now, and you can't kill Voldemort, how exactly are you going to defeat him and cause the regime to collapse? That doesn't make any sense to me."

She glanced up. "You aren't planning to have me kill him, are you?"

Draco stared at her and didn't even dignify the question with a response.

Hermione nodded to herself and looked down. "If you and Severus remove my manacles, Voldemort will know. Even if he doesn't know that Severus was the one to help you, you're responsible for me. If I escape, the blame will fall on you. There's no way for me to leave Europe without Voldemort realising you betrayed him." Draco said nothing.

Hermione stared up at him, a cold sensation creeping over her as the pieces of information she'd gathered over the months finally snapped into place. "That's the plan. Voldemort's dependent on

you. You're the lynchpin, the thing stabilising the regime. That's why you exposed yourself as High Reeve, so that he couldn't try to replace you with someone else." Her mouth felt dry, and she swallowed, her fingers rolling the fabric of his cloak between them. "Have you—have you found a way to remove your Dark Mark then?"

Draco stood immobile by the door as his mouth curved into a smile. "Of course. Once your manacles are off, I'll be able to remove it."

He reminded her of the New Year's Party. Every motion was so perfectly practiced. Despite how much she'd hated him, she'd still watched him; noticed details whose meanings had eluded her. Now, fused with her past knowledge of him, she could see the glimmers of Draco underneath. The person she'd known, ground down under his runes. He'd almost vanished, but there were still traces of him left.

She tilted her head to the side. "How?"

He gave a smooth shrug. "Severus figured something out. He did work with Dolohov for years."

There was an unnaturally long pause.

"You're lying," she finally said.

He cocked his head and studied her. His freezing, mocking intensity suddenly surfacing. "Really? Do you think you still know me well enough to tell?"

Defensive. He was always cruelest when he was vulnerable.

The corner of Hermione's mouth quirked up sadly. "Yes." Her heart felt like lead in her chest. "You used to be mostly truthful—to me."

His mouth twisted into savage smile. "Yes, I was."

Hermione tried to breathe and found herself drowning in raw grief. There was a sea around her, and Draco was standing fifteen feet away.

Her heart was beating faster and faster. She took a slow breath, and she met his eyes.

The fanfare is in the light, but the execution is in the dark.

"You're lying to me. You aren't going to remove your mark. You're not even intending to try. You're planning to die. You exposed yourself as High Reeve so that when Voldemort kills you for letting me escape, the regime will destabilise and collapse."

Draco stood staring at her for a moment before his lips curved into a smile bitter as poison. He sighed, and the facade fell. "I had hoped the library would preoccupy you for at least a week." He looked disappointed and tired. Hermione waited for him to say something else, but he didn't.

"That's your plan?" Her voice was shaking with disbelief. "Two years and your plan is still to hide me somewhere, get killed as a traitor, and think that I'll—I'll be alright with it?"

Draco was silent for several seconds, then he gave a low laugh. She felt it in her bones.

"Do you have a better solution this time too?" His tone was freezing. "After all, not every single horror that I've ever imagined has happened yet. Losing you and spending sixteen months trying and

failing to find you. Finding you tortured and broken. Keeping you as a prisoner in this house. Raping you." His voice was growing raw with grief and rage. "Having to hold you in my hands, and feel you in my head while your mind was ravaged. Finding someone raping you in my garden—"

"He didn't," Hermione said quickly, her chest constricting. "He didn't. You got there in time."

His eyes flooded with relief, but his mouth sharpened into a razor-edged smile. "Well, there's that."

He gave a short laugh and looked down at the floor. "Where was I? Ah yes. Finding you with your eye nearly gouged out because my wife had attempted to blind you. Finding you bludgeoning yourself against a window. Watching you waste away because I'd gotten you pregnant. Arriving to see you collapse and then learn that the damage from your occlumency and the foetal magic was so severe you might not ever wake up—that I might have killed you."

He had turned white. His lips thinned as his mouth twisted and then curved into a sneer. "Is that not enough? There are, undoubtedly, still unexplored depths to the potential misery between us. Should we endeavor to achieve all of it?"

He released a sharp breath, and his expression closed again. "If I removed your manacles, instead of having you taken to safety, I could put a wand in your hand and apparate you, pregnant, into the Dark Lord's Hall. It's been two years since you used magic, you can barely manage to walk up the stairs, and you still hardly eat anything, but never mind all that. Surely fighting for the greater good counts for something at some point."

Hermione flinched.

Draco's expression could have been carved from marble. "If I took you there, there's a marginal chance that if I were protecting you, or Severus and I both were, that you might be able to kill the Dark Lord before he summoned other Death Eaters. In which case, we would all die immediately because the paranoid monster has his castle cursed to collapse upon his death; one of his innumerable safety mechanisms."

He cocked his head back. "Or, more likely, we'd fail to kill him, because I've already tried dozens of times, and no matter who I sent or what method they tried, the attempt always failed. In which case I would have the option of killing you myself or watching as you were captured again and they locked manacles around both our wrists. Do you suppose he'd kill us quickly?"

Hermione shook her head, her throat too tight to breathe.

"No." Draco's eyes were ice although his expression remained carefully contained. "He would make it last. I've seen him do it—when he has an example to make of someone. He's drawn it out for weeks on occasion. He brings in healers to keep them alive until he's done." She could see the terror in his eyes. He looked away, over to the portrait of Narcissa. His eyes wouldn't stay; his gaze swept on.

He stared almost blankly at the far wall. "He'd kill you first. He'd have our history by then; I'm sure he'd use my mind as a reference. I've had more than two years to imagine all the things that could happen to you. All the things I thought might have been happening to you." His voice was almost deadened. "I'm sure he would make a point of doing all of them."

The edges of the room were blurring. Hermione tried to swallow, but her throat wouldn't work.

He gave a low sigh and rested a hand against the doorframe. "This isn't a new opportunity for you and your Gryffindor obstinance to try to save everyone." He sighed. "Believe me, I would run with you if I could. I always would have—" His voice faded for a moment.

"That was never an option, now was it? 'Aid the Order in defeating the Dark Lord to the *best* of my ability.' Moody didn't include an expiration date or any exemptions on that." He gave a bitter smirk for a moment before growing cold again. "The Dark Lord is on borrowed time. He has no hope of living more than a few years. The Wizarding world is sufficiently disillusioned with his ideology and reign, particularly with the spectacle he's now made with a repopulation program. When things destabilize, the regime will fall, and the International Confederation will step in and claim credit the way they usually do." A smile ghosted across his face as he looked at her. "In a few years, you may get that world you wanted. That—I can try to give you."

"No!" She said it forcefully.

His eyes were silver, and they flickered as he stared at her. "You always said you couldn't choose me over everyone else. I'm chained to a sinking ship. You cannot expect me to take you with me."

"I was lying—!" Her hands were shaking, and she was holding herself so rigidly she'd started rocking as she tried to breathe and not start crying. "I wasn't going to—Draco—"

She dropped her head down and pressed her hand against her sternum as she forced herself to inhale, gasping raggedly. The air burned in her lungs, and she kept gasping again and again, faster and faster.

Draco's hard expression faded, and he crossed the room. He knelt down in front of her. Hesitantly, as though he were approaching a skittish animal, he reached out and rested his hands gently on her shoulders.

"Granger, breathe. Breathe. You have to breathe." His expression was open and pleading.

She gave a low sob and dropped her head down until their foreheads touched.

"Breathe, please breathe." He kept saying to her. The heat of his hands sank through her clothing and into her skin as she squeezed her eyes closed and forced herself to breathe slowly until her chest stopped spasming.

"Draco—there has to be another way." She reached out, hands shaking, and touched his face. "I need you to live. You're mine. We said we'd run away together. Remember? Somewhere no one would find us."

His expression froze, and he glanced down, blinking repeatedly, before giving a hollow laugh under his breath. His hands slipped up from her shoulders, and he tilted her face so he could look into her eyes. "I would try to do anything you asked if I could."

The wistful way he said it cut her to the quick.

"Then please—" She traced across his cheekbones and captured the curve of his jaw with her fingertips. His face was only a breath away from hers. "Draco—there has to be another way. We can find it. I can—now that I remember—I'll help you."

Her voice was low, and it wavered. "I know—I'm not the same as I was, but you promised—I need

you. I need you to live. Even at Hogwarts—when I thought you must be dead—I kept holding on because I'll never go without you. I'll never leave you behind. You have to find another way."

He released a short breath and pulled her closer, pressing his lips against her forehead. "Granger–Granger, this has been the plan since the day the Dark Lord assigned you to me."

Hermione started and stared in horror as he continued.

"If I'd found you, I might have been able to manage something else, but once you were a person of interest to the Dark Lord and he wanted you assigned to Severus or me, there wasn't any means of getting you out that didn't involve compromising one of us. Severus couldn't take you to Romania without violating the terms of his Vow. It had to be me."

"No..."

He brushed his thumbs along her cheeks. "I can't kill the Dark Lord; Severus and I have tried. I can't run with you, even if I could remove my mark. This is defeating the Dark Lord to the best of my ability. It will get you out. You'll be safe after this."

Hermione gripped his hands. "I don't want to be safe. I want you to be alive. Make a new plan." He sighed and met her eyes. "Whatever I wanted if I saved Ginny. Granger, you promised. I want you to live, leave this world behind and live. That's what I always wanted for you. You have promises to keep. You have to take care of Ginny. You swore to Potter that you would."

"I promised to take care of you first. Always. I promised you always," she said fiercely. Her voice was shaking and she couldn't stop crying. She could feel her tears collecting against his fingers. "You weren't even going to tell me, were you? You said February. You were going to send me away, and I wouldn't have even remembered you yet. I wouldn't have even known until it was too late—And last week, you said I'd see you again."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I'm supposed to keep you calm, and I don't trust you, even without magic." His voice tightened. "The last time I was honest with you, you disappeared and never came back."

She flinched and her breathing stalled again. "I tried to come back," she forced the words out. "I tried—I tried to—tried—"

His hold tightened. "Breathe. Breathe. You don't have to tell me, I know. I read the report. You levelled half of Sussex and killed nearly everyone inside the wards. You wiped out almost the entire Dementor population in Great Britain. You killed fifteen werewolves, twenty vampires, and half dozen hags. After you lost your wand, you killed another werewolf, hag, and stabbed Montague twice before he managed to stun you. I know you tried." "Then—you have to try too."

"Granger, I have tried. This is the best I can do." He sighed. "We have a long goodbye in front of us now—I don't want to fight you through it."

She shook her head. "Let me try to find another way. I can—research. Maybe I can find a way to get your Dark Mark off. Please—let me try."

Draco paused for several seconds and stared at her. After a moment he nodded resignedly. "I'll provide you with what you want for research under two conditions: One, if your panic attacks increase because of it, you'll stop, and two, when Severus arrives, regardless of how close you may

think you are to a breakthrough, you will stop and leave without making me force you. You won't try to trick me or manipulate me, you will say goodbye and go."

He stared at her, his eyes intent and exacting as he spoke. "Agreed?"

Hermione pressed her lips together and swallowed. "I promise," she finally said.

She reached out and her fingertips traced lightly along his face. She watched his eyes turn from quicksilver to grey before he looked down, pressing his jaw against her hand

"Don't lie to me anymore, Draco." Her voice was pleading and she drew him closer and pressed her forehead against his, breathing him in, feeling him close to her again. "Please don't lie to me." He gave another hollow laugh. "I won't."

Chapter 3

June 2005

Draco stood, withdrawing his hands and walking back until he was nearly five feet away. Fully out of arm's reach.

He suddenly seemed uncertain, as though he no longer knew how to interact with her. His hands at his sides opened and closed while he hesitated and looked away from her.

The grief and pain between had reasserted itself, sweeping in like a tidal wave. It hurt to look at him, to want him, to crave him as though he were oxygen, but not know how they'd ever reconcile everything that existed between them now.

"You should sleep," he said after a moment, glancing down and straightening his robes. "I'll bring whatever books you want tomorrow."

Hermione watched him, hesitating and drawing a quick breath.

"Do you want to stay?" She forced the question out before she could reconsider it.

Draco stared at her with his expression blank, and her heart began pounding painfully in her chest.

His eyes unfocused and then cleared.

"You don't want me to," he said after studying her for a second longer, his mouth twisting in the corner. "Don't try to force yourself into something because you feel obliged in some way."

He turned on his heel and headed towards the door.

"No," she said, standing up, her voice sharp. "Don't go."

He froze.

She swallowed, throat tightening. "I want you to stay. I do. It's just—sometimes—sometimes —" She tripped over the words as she tried to explain. "My memories are out of order—I can't always remember—" She swallowed. "Stay. I want you to. I don't want to be alone."

She stepped carefully towards him. "Will you?" Her fingers were trembling as they brushed against the back of his hand. She was half-braced that he might jerk back or shove her away. She swallowed and edged closer, studying his face. His expression was a mask. She looked down and slipped her fingers into his hand. She was hardly breathing, and her hand started shaking visibly.

This would be fine. Just breathe and it would be fine.

Obedient.

Quiet.

Not to resist.

She closed her eyes and drew a short, quick breath. The sound filled her ears. "Hermione," Draco's voice made her eyes snap open as she looked up. He was staring down at her with a closed

expression. “Don’t do this.”

He carefully took hold of her wrist and pulled his hand free of hers, fingers tightening for a moment. “I’ll come see you tomorrow.”

“No.” She grasped his hand again. “No. Don’t go. I don’t want you to go. I just—I just—” her jaw trembled so much she struggled to speak. “I don’t—” she swallowed and looked up at him. “I only want to hold your hand. I don’t want to—I can’t say no if you—because of the —”

Draco’s eyes flickered, and his hand in hers twitched away.

She stared down at their hands, her hold tightening. “Just stay,” she said, inhaling sharply. “I want to know you’re not—somewhere else.”

Hermione’s heart racing until the blood roared in her ears, but she squared her shoulders and forced herself to walk towards her bed.

It crossed her mind that maybe she should have agreed to a different room. Then it wouldn’t be the same bed.

She steeled herself, pushing the thought away. It would still be a bed. She’d still be lying on it and trusting him not to hurt her.

She trusted him. She knew she trusted him. Always.

She laid down on the far side of the bed and curled on her side, staring at him. He sat down slowly on the other side and looked so uncomfortable he seemed on the verge of apparating straight out of the room. She reached towards him. His fingers twitched before he extended his hand and entwined their fingers.

He leaned against the headboard. He didn’t appear to have any intention of sleeping. She studied him, tracing her eyes over his face, trying to memorise him again.

The more clearly she remembered him, the more overtly she could see the ways he’d changed. He looked spent, visibly ground down to the point that it showed in his features.

His fingers twitched in her hand.

He had tremors that didn’t feel like typical cruciatus muscle damage. They felt psychosomatic; the long-term consequence of cruciatus. Torture had been so overused on him that the effects had become permanent.

Voldemort had punished him repeatedly for his failure in catching the last Order member; the person responsible for destroying the locket Umbridge had worn.

Hermione’s throat closed and she gripped his hand tighter. “You—” her voice caught. “You destroyed the horcrux the way you did because you hoped it would force Voldemort to still recall Severus in February. Didn’t you?”

He stared at her and then glanced away, moving his chin slightly in acknowledgment.

There was a hollow sensation in her chest as she thought back on all the occasions she’d noticed he’d been tortured. All those times she told herself not to care, that he deserved it.

Daily, for over a month.

“I am so sorry, Draco,” she said.

He stiffened as though the words had struck him and nearly jerked his hand away from her.

“Don’t apologise to me. You don’t have anything to apologise for.” He snapped the words out as though he were on the verge of snarling.

Hermione stared at him in silence until he looked away from her.

“You’re angry at me, aren’t you?” she finally asked.

Draco stared across the room, his expression unreadable. “That doesn’t mean you have any reason to apologise to me.”

Hermione studied him. “Why not?”

“Because—“ he blinked, “—I have to apologise first, and I—” he looked up at the canopy over the bed. “and I—”

“Draco...” “Christ, Granger,” his voice was ragged, and he ran a hand through his hair. “You have no idea how much I’d hoped you’d never remember anything once you came here. What I wouldn’t do to go back and get it right. If I hadn’t told you I’d blown my cover—if I’d lied and not tried to say goodbye, none of this would have happened to you.”

Hermione‘s throat tightened. “It would have killed me if you’d sent me away, and I'd found out later you’d died because I’d asked you to save Ginny. I would never have gotten over it. Not ever. I would do it all again,” she said. “Every second. I would do it all again to save you.”

There was a resounding silence.

Draco stares at her, a mixture of shock and rage sweeping across his face. “You didn’t save me,” he said when he finally seemed capable of speaking at all. “You just put us in hell for two years.”

It was like being punched.

She felt herself pale as the blood rushed from her head. Her entire body curled inward.

Draco’s hold on her hand tightened, his expression instantly regretful. “Wait—I didn’t—”

She dipped her head down and tried to breathe “I tried to come back.” Her voice shook. “I really did.”

“I know. I didn’t mean—”

She looked away. “You shouldn’t have assumed that l’d be willing to lose you. Did you think I don’t feel things as much as you? That I cared less because I had other obligations? You shouldn’t have thought I cared less, I did everything I could to keep you safe. You don’t know all the things I did to keep you safe.”

“I just—” “I promised—every time you asked, I promised I was yours always. There aren’t any exemptions or expiration dates on always.”

A crushing pain in her head woke her the next morning. Her fingers were still entwined with

Draco's in the centre of the bed. He was asleep, but his features were tense.

Finding him in bed with her was familiar. There weren't any conflicting memories in seeing him asleep.

When he was close, it felt like slipping into the past. It was as natural and instinctive as breathing to touch him, to be near him. She felt as though she couldn't be close enough to him. It was mostly the in-between distances that she'd abruptly find herself back in a moment in which he was looming over her and forcing his way into her mind; when he'd closed in on her and gripped her by the arm as he apparated her; when he'd said something so cruel it blindsided her.

But when he was close, he was Draco. He was hers.

He'd been vulnerable with her. He loved her, even though he never expected them to be anything but doomed. He'd loved her all the same.

She was cold, and wanted to move closer, but she was afraid he might wake if she shifted. She stayed where she was and looked at him.

"I'm going to take care of you," she mouthed the words silently. "I'm going to find a way to take care of you."

She felt it the instant he woke. Tension shot through his entire body as soon as he was conscious. His eyes snapped open, and he stared at her.

His eyes immediately narrowed. "Are you alright?"

She twitched her shoulder. "My head. It's always worse after a good day."

He let go of her hand and touched her forehead. "You're feverish again."

She didn't expend the effort of moving her head in acknowledgment.

"Can you eat?"

Hermione's stomach twisted, roiling at the thought. "Maybe later."

His eyebrows knit together and he looked visibly worried. "I'm required in Belgium today. I'll be back tomorrow. Stay in bed."

He stood up, still studying her.

Hermione stirred and lifted her head. "You said you'd get me books."

There was a flash of irritation in his eyes, his lips thinned. "Tomorrow."

"No. You said today. I can still read." She tried to sit up. "Otherwise I'll just lie here, worrying."

He sighed through his teeth. "Fine. Stop getting up. I'll have Topsy bring you books, quills, and parchment after you've eaten." Hermione lay back down and pulled her arms more tightly against her body as she huddled, trying to feel warmer. She swallowed. "I—just need the books. I can't touch quills so—there's not much use for parchment."

The muscles in Draco's jaw rippled. "Right," he said, as he came around the bed. "Just the books then."

He conjured an extra blanket and draped it over her. “Tell Topsy if you want anything. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Be careful, Draco. Don’t—don’t—” her voice failed, and she was quiet.

“You have to come back,” she finally said.

“I will.”

Once he was gone, Hermione slumped more limply into the bed. She felt as though her skull was about to crack open.

She felt miserably nauseous, but Draco had said Topsy wouldn’t bring her books until she’d eaten. She didn’t know if it would count if she vomited everything back up.

At midday she managed to keep a potion and a small cup of broth down. Topsy delivered a stack of books and a folio of handwritten pages that Hermione recognised as Draco’s handwriting; all his notes from his attempts to remove the Dark Mark.

Topsy propped Hermione up with pillows so she could lie on her side and read.

Hermione tried to review the notes clinically and not think about the fact that Draco had been experimenting on unwilling subjects that had all died in the process.

They were all Death Eaters, and several had helped to torture Narcissa.

Draco had been thorough. His research and analysis had been comprehensive. He had to have taught himself a considerable amount of magi-biology and healing theory in addition to his curse research.

He’d tried nine times. Twice more since the war had ended.

Hermione knew from her research that Voldemort had been a brilliant student at Hogwarts. Whenever he’d created the Dark Mark, he’d invested considerable time and effort into making it an inescapable collar to lock around the throats of his followers. It wasn’t particularly elaborate; it was simple, straightforward, and lethal.

At the back of the folio was a set of notes in sharp, spiked handwriting. Severus, she realised, had also analysed the mark.

Hermione read through the notes twice and then curled into a tight ball, gripping her throbbing head and trying to think, trying to analyse. She kept grinding her teeth together as she struggled to cope with the pain. Eventually she passed out.

When she woke again, Draco was seated at the edge of the bed. He had her pregnancy guide open, his eyes skimming across the pages. She watched him for a moment.

“You’re back,” she said. He immediately closed the book and looked over at her.

Her headache had faded again into something less debilitating. She sat up carefully and picked up the folio. “I read your notes, but not the books yet. I have a few book titles I think might be useful.”

“Alright.” His mouth quirked at the corner as he watched her.

She straightened the pages and fixed the corner of one that had been dogeared. “Part of the curse

interferes with the blood's coagulation. It's a hemophilia type curse that may be a long-term side effect. I'll need to create a potion; a variation on what's used to counter vampire bites. It will require regular redosage, but once Voldemort dies, you might not have to keep taking it."

She gnawed at her lip. "It wouldn't address the immediate issue of getting the wound to close. You tried all the normal methods, even old Muggle ones like cauterizing and—tar, but I've just started. I'll find something."

Draco nodded again and glanced away.

The conversation was painfully stilted. Draco did not want to talk about his attempts in any further detail than the notes he'd provided. He was distracted and kept glancing towards the clock. His expression was appropriately engaged, but his eyes were flat as she mentioned theories she wanted to explore.

She realised, as she watched him, that he was indulging her. The notes and the books were to appease her. They were the library. Something to preoccupy her while he continued with his own plans.

She stopped talking and just stared at her lap. There was a long pause, and he stood up.

"I'll have the books you mentioned sent later today."

As he was leaving, he suddenly stopped and turned back.

He stood staring at her, and his mouth moved slightly several times before he spoke.

"Granger—you don't—" He stopped, and she saw his hand curl into a fist at his side before disappearing behind his back. He pressed his lips into a hard line and blinked before staring just past her. "I never assumed you'd keep a pregnancy." He was almost expressionless as he spoke, but his Adam's apple dipped briefly. "I can send a potion with you so you can—resolve it once you're out of Europe. Just tell me—" He cut himself off, and he looked down, setting his jaw. "No, never mind that, there's no need. I'll send it. There's no reason for you to have to tell me what you choose."

He turned on his heel and left before she could speak.

Hermione lay in bed, tracing her fingers over her lower abdomen. If she searched, she could feel the small but firm beginning swell of her uterus just above her pelvis.

It hadn't occurred to her to have an abortion if she escaped, or that it would be the assumption Draco would be operating under.

She would have jumped out a window or poisoned herself in order to prevent a baby from being born into Malfoy Manor and left in the care of Astoria, but it hadn't occurred to her to abort it if she escaped. It was a baby. To Hermione, it had been a baby since the moment Stroud had announced Hermione was pregnant.

Not a foetus. Not an heir. It was a baby, and one that she already felt intensely protective of. When she'd seen the fluttering light of the heartbeat, it had felt like her heart had been stolen.

But Draco was assuming she wouldn't keep it once she had any choice in the matter.

He'd raped her. She was pregnant. He expected she'd want an abortion as soon as she was free.

He was assuming that he'd stay behind to die, and she would leave and try to forget everything that had happened by erasing it.

Topsy came with a stack of books in the evening, several which were brand new.

"Is Draco here?" Hermione asked as she turned one of the books over in her hands.

"He is just returned."

"Can you tell him that I want him?"

Topsy gave a bobbing curtsy and popped away.

Hermione went over to the portrait on the wall.

Narcissa Malfoy stared at Hermione.

Hermione had only seen Narcissa once, at the Quidditch World Cup more than a decade earlier. Narcissa was sixteen in the painting, the same age Draco had been when he took the Dark Mark. "I want to save your son," Hermione said. "But I don't know how to."

Narcissa said nothing. She just sat in her chair, studying Hermione in silence. Eventually Hermione gave up and turned away.

She was flipping through the books that Topsy had brought when the door opened.

Draco stood in the doorway.

Hermione closed the book. Her throat tightened. He always stood so far away and every inch of the space felt weighted.

"Your mother's portrait won't talk to me," she said.

Draco looked over. The portrait stood, looking at Draco for a moment before turning and disappearing out of the frame.

"It's not you. She doesn't talk to anyone but me. My father's spent hours begging her to just look at him. The frame used to be in the drawing room of the South Wing. The portrait saw everything that happened to my mother. It stopped speaking for a long time afterwards. When my mother was released, she took the portrait up to her rooms." His eyes were flat and unreadable. "She used to stand in front of it for hours, touching the portrait's hand on the canvas, as though they were trying to reach each other."

Hermione stared at the empty frame. Voldemort's influence was like poison in the Malfoy family. As though he'd branded himself not only onto Draco and Lucius' arms, but into the fabric of their legacy. He'd destroyed Narcissa and corrupted their home. Even the portrait, a shadow of Narcissa's memory, was silent and scarred.

Draco looked back at Hermione. "She asked to watch over you. She wanted to be sure you were alright while you were here."

Hermione forced a wan smile before glancing down, hesitating for several seconds.

Her hands crept towards her stomach as she looked up. "I wanted to talk about what you said earlier,

before you left."

Draco's expression instantly closed, and his gaze sharpened like a blade.

Hermione's chest tightened. Draco was suddenly looming over her, that same cold expression on his face.

"You want me to look at you, Granger? Fine. I'm looking. It's delightful, I must say, to see all the guilt in your eyes. You know, I used to think the circumstances of my servitude to the Dark Lord were as cruel an enslavement as anyone could conceive. But I admit, it pales somewhat beside you."

Her heart stalled, and she blinked repeatedly trying to refocus on the present. "Can you come closer?" Her mouth felt dry. "It's easier to talk to you when you aren't so far away."

He walked over, and her heart rate increased with every step.

His expression was guarded.

She gnawed at her lower lip. She looked up when he was standing only a foot away.

If she touched him, he wouldn't seem so cold.

He didn't look like he wanted her to touch him.

She forced herself not to dwell on it, lifting her chin and meeting his gaze. "I didn't realise you expected me to terminate the pregnancy if I escaped. I understand why you thought I might—before, but I'm not. I wouldn't."

His expression didn't change. His eyes didn't flicker with even a slight reaction. "You may change your mind once you're free."

Hermione shook her head. "I won't."

His eyes remained flat, but she could see the tension in the corners of them. He straightened so that he loomed over her, and she felt as though she were being strangled.

His lip curled so that his teeth flashed. "There's no reason to make commitments to me regarding what you'll do once you're free. Do what you want."

Hermione set her jaw. "I'm going to. And that's why I won't use it. I want you know that I won't. I would always regret it. I would—I would always wonder if the baby would have had your eyes. Every winter I'd think about how old they'd be and wonder what they'd be doing. I would try to guess what kind of wand they would have gotten, and what subjects they would have liked, and whether they'd have been a natural occlumens like you and me." She was speaking quickly because her throat was growing thick, her cheekbones were beginning to ache. "I would wonder if they'd like to read. If they'd have hair like mine. If you—if you die—I would want to tell them all about you. Everything about you. I've—I've never gotten to tell anyone about you." Her chest spasmed. "People should know what you're like."

Draco scoffed in the back of his throat and glanced up towards the ceiling. "What I'm like? What exactly do you think I'm like?" He gave a short laugh. "You have a chance to have a new life. Don't drag my memory with you."

Hermione shook her head

He stared down at her, his gaze hard. “Do you want to walk through your life with a Death Eater’s bastard chained to you? The whole world knows you’re here and what I did to you in this house. It was quite thoroughly publicised, as you may recall. No matter what colour eyes it has, or how old it gets, it will be the child of a murderer, conceived because I—*raped* you while you were my prisoner, and everyone will know that. Everyone.” His chest jerked as he spoke, and he looked away from her. “Leave it all behind, Granger.” He inhaled. “Have children with someone else someday.”

Hermione stared at him. “Is that what you think I’m going to do? Run away and hide, and pretend that you were a monster I was lucky to get away from?”

He stared down at her, expression unreadable. “It wouldn’t be a lie.”

Hermione met his silver eyes and saw the flat, empty resignation in them.

“I hate you. I hold you partly responsible for every person who has died so far in this war and every person who will die. You don’t need to convince me that you’re a monster, I already know it.”

Her throat tightened so much it was hard to swallow as she reached towards him. “Draco, you’re not a monster. You didn’t have any choice. Did you think I’d still hate you once I remembered?” She stepped closer and caught his face in her hands. “Even before I remembered, you were the only thing that ever felt safe.”

She stared up into his eyes. “I left a note. Did you get my note? I love you.”

He flinched as though struck, and she felt his jaw tremble against her fingers. He started to shake his head, and she stilled him, pulling him closer.

“I love you,” she said more firmly, her voice shaking with intensity. “I love you. I will always love you. Always. Until there’s nothing left of me.”

She rose up on her toes, tilted her chin forward, and kissed him.

He was frozen as her lips touched his.

“I love you. I love you. I love you.” She said the words against his mouth. Her fingers slid along the curve of his jaw as her lips kept moving against his.

He still didn’t move. She pressed herself closer to him.

Then he shook. His hand rose up to capture her face, and he pulled her against himself. His fingers tangled in her hair as his palms cradled her cheeks. His mouth was burning. He kissed her and kissed her. He kissed her like he was starving, like he’d been drowning. His tongue and his teeth and his lips pressed against hers. Her mouth brushed against his, and she nipped him. His tongue flicked against her lower lip and slid against hers. It was as though he were trying to pour himself into her or consume her.

His fingers slid along the shells of her ears and his thumbs caressed the arches of her cheekbones. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she met every movement of his lips. He drew a ragged gasp against her mouth, and she felt him shuddering. He kissed her until she could feel the desperation in his blood. Then he drew back, resting his forehead against hers. His hands were

shaking as he held her.

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry—I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for everything I did to you,” he said, his voice hoarse and broken. “I love you. You left, and I’d never told you.”

She asked him to stay every night.

They never did more than kiss. Draco’s hands rarely moved below her shoulders when he kissed her.

She would curl up in his arms and fall asleep listening to him breathe.

During the day he’d leave to “work,” and she’d research, giving Topsy longer and longer lists of books she wanted. Curse-breaking. Dark Arts. Lethal curses. Potions encyclopaedias and ingredient indexes. Curse analytics. Muggle medical textbooks.

She’d hoped, if the curse was broken, she’d be able to flense the mark. But after running a mental simulation of the procedure four different ways, she concluded it was impossible. The curse in the mark wasn’t dermal, it was like his runes, even if she cut out all the muscle tissue in his forearm and removed and regrew his bones, assuming she could keep his hand in stasis comprehensively enough to preserve the tissue and nerves for up to twenty-four hours, the Dark Mark would just regrow along with bones, muscle, and skin.

Draco estimated they would have a few hours at most once her manacles were removed. It was possible that Voldemort would know immediately; he was intensely interested in Hermione.

If Hermione were trying to get Draco to flee with her, there wouldn’t be time for an elaborate healing procedure. The removal would have to be fast.

He’d have to cut off his left arm, just below the elbow.

The thought left a painful knot in the pit of her stomach as she asked for more resources on amputation techniques. She wasn’t sure even amputation would be successful. The wound was cursed not to heal; paired with magically accelerated haemorrhaging, the result was rapidly lethal.

It wasn’t like the gradual deadliness of the curse Dumbledore had received on his hand. The damage refused to be contained or slowed, magically or otherwise. Tourniquets. Essence of Dittany. Cauterisation. Healing spells. Severus and Draco had tried without success to stop the bleeding.

It was as though the curse was determined to force all the blood out of the body.

She kept narrowing and narrowing the options. Every day felt like a screw being more tightly turned. Her headaches stopped being debilitating, but they were steadily replaced by shriveling anxiety. The date on the wall felt like a daily death knell. She researched until she couldn’t see to read. It was the only way she knew how to make herself feel useful.

Feeling useful was all she was doing. She knew Draco was letting her feel like she was contributing. He was letting her try, so she’d feel like she’d done something. It was just an outlet, like doing crunches in her room or searching the manor from garret to dungeon in the hopes of finding a weapon. It was something for her to do. Something preoccupy her with.

When Draco was with her, he treated her like it was all a goodbye. He looked at her like he was

saying goodbye. He touched her like he was saying goodbye. He'd wrap his arms around her shoulders and rest his head on hers, and she could feel it.

One morning she returned from showering and found all her books gone. Topsy was standing beside the bed.

"The Healer is coming this day, the Master says all the books is needing to be put away."

Hermione gave a resigned nod and went and stared out the window. It was summer, lush and beautiful. She hadn't been outside in over a month.

It felt like such an effort; to go all the way outside, to try to stay calm under the open sky. It would waste time and energy she could be spending trying to find a way to remove Draco's mark.

There was a soft crack, and she looked over her shoulder and found that Draco had appeared.

"Stroud will be arriving soon."

Hermione nodded. "Topsy mentioned it."

He walked closer and stood, staring out the window beside her.

"When did you last go outside?"

Hermione kept looking down at the maze. She reached out and rested her finger on the grill of the window. "I don't remember. Early May."

"You should."

Her fingers slipped away from the glass and dropped to her side. "It's too open. I don't want to."

Draco was silent.

"Fresh air would be good for you. It might help you eat more."

Hermione looked down. "I don't have time."

"Read downstairs, sit by an open window. You used to always go outside." Her jaw threatened to tremble. She tensed it and shrugged. "Well—" her voice was careful, "I was different then."

"I'm not talking about years ago. You used to go outside at the estate. You used to go out of this room. Now you hardly do that."

She shrugged and kept staring out the window. "I didn't have anything else to do."

He gave a sharp sigh. "Granger—why won't you go out?" Hermione was quiet for a moment. She rested a fingertip against the glass and drew Kenaz for knowledge, creativity and inspiration. She had never imagined how much she could miss writing, how she'd taken for granted the ability to put her thoughts down on paper to organise and return to. She missed writing almost as much as she missed reading. She found herself often drawing on the windows to try to process everything crammed into her mind.

Beside Kenaz she drew Sowilo, for success and wholeness, and Dagaz for breakthrough, the power of change, and hope.

Then she sighed and drew Isa above them all and tapped it before looking down. “I feel the safest—calmest—in this room. There’s still a lot I’m processing, and it—it affects me more when I’m in other parts of the house.” She swallowed, and her shoulder twitched. “I might panic, and then you won’t let me research anymore.”

Draco went still. “Granger—” his voice faded briefly. “Don’t—don’t keep yourself in a cage because of me.”

Hermione looked up at him quickly. “I’m not. I just—I don’t want to take chances. There are more important things than going outside.”

Draco started to reply but stopped, his expression growing cold. “Stroud’s here.”

Hermione felt her stomach sink. “Alright.”

He left to bring Stroud, and Hermione sat on the edge of her bed, willing her heartbeat to slow.

The door swung open, and the healer entered, Draco only a few steps behind her, his indifferent mask fully in place.

“You’re conscious this time,” Stroud said, glancing over at Hermione as she conjured a table in the middle of the room.

Hermione’s stomach flipped as she stood and walked slowly over, seating herself on the edge before being commanded to.

She and Draco had discussed the eventuality of Stroud’s arrival but being braced for it didn’t make her heart pound any less painfully in her chest. Stroud flicked her wand and cast several diagnostics. “Well, you’re not comatose or on the verge of starvation anymore. I would have visited sooner for this exam, but the High Reeve was afraid you were too delicate. You’ll be entering the second trimester this week.”

Stroud looked Hermione over with a critical eye. “You’re quite sickly looking. You should still be outdoors at least an hour. You don’t want to disadvantage a child by neglecting your health.”

Hermione’s chest tightened, and her fingers crept protectively towards her stomach.

Stroud waved her wand, and the glowing orb appeared. Larger, about the size of Hermione’s fist.

The rapid, fluttering light filled the room like a star. Hermione stared at it and forgot to breathe.

Stroud inspected the orb and cast several spells on it before scribbling in her file. “Still healthy. It doesn’t appear that the coma or seizures caused any developmental damage.” Stroud cast another diagnostic spell and, as it manifested, her face fell.

“Female. What a pity.”

Chapter 4

Hermione felt as though her heart was in her throat.

It was girl. A little girl.

It made the pregnancy so real that it was jarring.

Stroud inspected the diagnostic further and sighed. “Well, not what we hoped.”

She banished the reading with a flick of her wand.

“It’s unfortunate, we’ve had several surrogates unexpectedly miscarry after it turned out they carried girls.” Her eyes slid past Hermione, over to Draco. “Of course that won’t be a concern here, given that the pregnancy is primarily a mechanism of memory retrieval. In your case, High Reeve, there’s always the next surrogate—for a real heir.”

Hermione felt herself grow cold. Her throat tightened, and she looked away from Stroud, her eyes darting over to Draco.

He was staring at the fluttering orb as though he couldn’t look away, but his posture shifted slightly.

Hermione wished she could touch him, hold his hand. It felt like a moment they should be sharing. She was pregnant with a baby girl but she felt as though all the reaction she could make was to sit quietly, avert her eyes, and wonder how it might have been under different circumstances.

Draco still barely acknowledged the pregnancy beyond how it related to Hermione’s health. Despite her repeated insistence that she wasn't going to get an abortion, he refused to treat it as having anything to do with him. It was her pregnancy, her baby. When she tried to talk about it, he grew terse, and if she pushed, he excused himself and left.

He blinked, and the muscles in his jaw rippled as he caught himself and averted his eyes, staring stonily out the window.

Hermione looked back as Stroud continued to cast spells and scribble notes.

Stroud cast another spell, and a projection of Hermione’s brain appeared.

Hermione’s memories were glowing gold in the same hue as the fluttering orb. All the little glowing lights scattered across her brain had changed colour and some appeared to have fractured. There were splinters of light running along what appeared to be the neural pathways. “How interesting,” Stroud said as she prodded it. “What did the mind healers say when they saw the development?”

Draco’s looked away from the window and stared at the projection. His nostrils flared as though he smelled something foul. “To keep her calm if she ever woke and to prevent further seizures if I wanted to avoid permanent brain damage and loss of the memories.” He sneered at Stroud. “You should be grateful your method of forced recovery didn’t kill her. I can’t imagine the Dark Lord would have taken the news well.”

Stroud folded slightly and looked nervous. “I said, when I proposed it, that it was theoretical,” Stroud said, her voice stiff. “I made it quite clear to the Dark Lord. Has she shown any signs of

having recovered more memories?"

"No," Draco said, his lip curling as he glanced derisively at Hermione, then focused on Stroud, intent. "The only discernible difference in her behavior since pregnancy is that she's more unstable and barely able to leave her room."

Stroud sighed and prodded at the projection. "It's a pity we can't just dose her with veritaserum. How long did the mind healer say not to use magic on her brain?"

"As long as the magic levels remain critically heightened, anything that disrupts the brain magically, with the exception of anticonvulsants, is to be avoided. He estimated my legilimency would be safe to attempt by the beginning of the third trimester, assuming her stress levels drop to a point where her anxiety stops being a trigger for the seizures." Draco's eyes hooded, and he looked impassive. His hand was near his wand.

Stroud's pursed her lips. "That's an unfortunately long wait. You informed him that the memories were urgent?"

Draco waved his hand dismissively. "You've seen the reports; based on the mind healer's analysis, the more crucial the information is, the more protected it is. Attempting to extract it prematurely could result in recovering nothing but non-essential information. Memories are not discrete; they overlap associatively. The memories the Dark Lord is most eager for will not be the first memories recovered but the last ones."

Stroud prodded at the projection of Hermione's brain once more before banishing it. "Well, now that she's reaching the end the first trimester, she should begin eating and recovering physically. It may not be a concern for you, given that the child won't be the heir, but elevated cortisol levels can affect a baby. With the restrictions the surrogates have on their behavior, stress can manifest in unusual ways if unaddressed. Exercise is a crucial way of channeling it. You should command her to exercise as soon as she appears stable enough to manage it."

Draco gave a short, indifferent nod of acknowledgement.

He escorted Stroud out a few minutes later. Hermione went over and pressed her ear against the door. She could hear Stroud's voice receding down the hallway. "If you don't want to keep a female, the lab will take it immediately after delivery. The Dark Lord understands that not everyone wants the obligation of multiple children. The ones with good potential will be raised to contribute to the program's next phase, and the others will be useful lab subjects. There's still so little understood about early magical development…"

Hermione's tongue curdled in her mouth, and her stomach wrenched so violently that she nearly vomited in the middle of the floor. She shakily went and sat on the edge of her bed.

Draco would never let it happen. He would never let it happen to her, to their baby. But that wouldn't save the other surrogates or their babies.

She closed her eyes.

She hoped Draco would return soon so she could ask to have her books back. Otherwise there was nothing to do but worry, and worry, and worry.

It was impossible to do anything but worry and then worry over the fact that she was worried.

Elevated cortisol could impact the baby.

Stay calm, otherwise she might have a seizure.

Then Draco might not let her research.

Then—

She tried not to think about it.

She mentally reviewed healing spells and developed theoretical potions for counteracting hemophilia and stopping hemorrhage.

It was nearly an hour before Draco reappeared. As soon as she saw him, her mind immediately returned to the appointment.

It was going to be a girl.

Now that she knew the gender, she could picture it more clearly. Before, it had been more abstract, a baby. Now it was a girl. A baby girl.

There were portraits of Malfoy children in the manor, always blond and grey-eyed… and male.

The Malfoy line was predominantly—entirely male.

Hermione couldn't think of any portraits featuring female Malfoy descendants. An heir, and occasionally a spare.

Hermione didn't know if it were a genetic anomaly or, more likely, a selection process; perhaps the Malfoys didn't traditionally keep female pregnancies. Draco stopped a foot away from her and stood. He seemed only partly-present, as though his mind were elsewhere. Hermione's hands were laid against her stomach, and she watched him carefully.

"So—it's a girl," she said.

His expression instantly closed, and he gave a short nod.

Her mouth twitched. "I didn't know Malfoys had girls."

"No," he said, shrugging.

Hermione felt as though there were a stone lodged in her throat. "Does it—does that matter to you then? That it's not a boy?"

Draco blinked and seemed to be suddenly roused from wherever his mind had been.

"What? No." He stared at her. "The gender has never mattered to me."

The feeling in her throat was replaced by a heaviness in her chest. Hermione nodded. "Alright. I just wondered."

Draco eyed her. "It's an enchantment on the bloodline intended to keep the estate intact. Malfoys require a marriage bond to produce an heir with a witch."

"Oh," was all she could think to say. After several seconds she added "Stroud doesn't know." He

shook his head and looked down and appeared to be studying the polish on his shoes. “It never seemed worth mentioning, given that the necessity of an heir made my efforts appear earnest.”

Hermione looked away.

Get married. Have children. Grow old with someone.

There’d been a point when she’d been resigned to the fact she’d never have those things. She’d told herself that there’d be more important things to console herself with; Harry and Ron would still be alive, Voldemort would be defeated, the world would be better. That knowledge would be enough to fill the emptiness.

But Harry and Ron weren’t alive. Voldemort wasn’t defeated. The world felt so broken she didn’t know how it would ever be better.

Now she felt the loss of the simple things.

“Can I have my books back before you go?” she asked, looking up at him again.

“I’ll have Topsy bring them.” She looked down at her shoes. “I’ll try to go for walks again. Stroud was right, it is important for the baby, so I should do it.”

She looked up and gave a small smile.

Draco stared at her, and eventually her smile faded. She looked away towards the window. It was so—open. Her fingers twitched, and she slipped them behind her back.

“I’ll go with you,” he said. “You don’t need to go alone.”

He extended his hand, and she took it.

They went outside and walked slowly along a lane lined with fruit trees, their fingers entwined. The blossoms had faded and been replaced by leaves; their path was canopied by the arching branches.

“I used to climb these trees when I was a boy,” Draco abruptly said.

Hermione looked over him in surprise. He’d always been silent during the walks before. It was unfamiliar to have him be conversational.

He stared down the lane, his expression far away. “I was told not to climb them, but when my lessons for the day were done, I’d come and try to.”

He looked over at a gnarled apple tree near them. “I got stuck in that tree. It seemed enormous to me at the time. Topsy tried to get me down, but I wouldn’t let her. I sat on that branch, shouting for my mother for an hour before she came home from Diagon Alley.”

Hermione studied the branch only a few feet above ground, and her mouth quirked up.

Draco turned. “If we go down this lane and cut across the field, there’s a pond where I used to catch frogs. There are usually ducks and herons there. I was given a net for my fifth birthday, and I used to try to catch anything I could find. They were for my zoo. I used to say I was going to be a magizoologist when I grew up. I was very set on the idea that I would travel to Africa someday on an expedition. My father was horrified.” Draco was expressionless as he spoke. Hermione felt a growing sense of unease.

“I was the terror of fairies and gnomes,” he added after another minute. “I got bitten once by a gnome, trying to dig it up. Bled everywhere.” He gave an empty laugh. “My mother was terrified I’d end up with a scar.”

He started walking slowly down the lane again, still holding Hermione’s hand.

“I always liked flying. My father gave me a toy broom when I was two, despite my mother’s objections. Theodore Nott and I used to race each other all over the estate. I nearly broke my arm crashing into the side of the manor when I was eight.”

He was quiet after that until they reached the end of trees. “Topsy will go with you. She’s cared for several babies. She nearly raised me for the first few years when my mother was unwell. She helped Ginny with James too.” He looked over at Hermione. “It’s arranged now —her ownership will transfer to you. She’s a good elf. She’ll know any stories about me you could want.”

Hermione stopped walking as she realised what he was doing.

He was trying to give her what she wanted. For him, acknowledging that he would have a child meant acknowledging that he wouldn’t meet it.

He was telling her stories so she could tell his daughter about what he’d been like before school, before the war.

He was making arrangements.

He stared out across the fields. “The magic on the estate will go dormant unless my father produces a new heir,” he said a moment later. “Assuming he does not, the manor will recognise and accept a descendant—if she wants to claim it. There are documents I’ll have for you to take, to make a formal claim on the estate if you want it legitimised. But there’s no reason you’ll have to return, there are vaults in your name already and other assets I’ve transferred that would be easier to liquidate.”

Hermione’s shoulders started to shake.

Draco looked at her. His eyes were a stormy grey and intent as he studied her face. “I brought you too far. You’re tired. We’ll go back.”

Hermione still didn’t move. Her throat felt thick, and her legs were threatening to give out beneath her. She had a thousand things she wanted to say and felt at a loss about how to communicate any of them.

He stepped closer. “Can you walk back?”

She managed to shake her head infinitesimally.

He stepped closer, moving slowly and gauging her reaction. He slipped his left arm around her waist and lifted her up into his arms, carrying her back towards the manor.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder as she started to cry. She cried in his arms the whole way to her room. That night her head was rested on his chest as she lay in bed and watched the clock move. Draco had one hand on her head, twisted through her hair, while his other hand traced patterns along her arm through her robes.

She sat up, and stared down at him. He looked up at her, his expression guarded. She reached out, resting her hand on his chest, then leaned over and kissed him. She closed her eyes and memorised the sensation of their lips meeting, how their noses brushed against each other, the faint stubble along his jaw under her fingers as she pressed her hand against his face. She deepened the kiss, losing herself in the sensation of him. She could smell the sharp bite of cedarwood oil in his clothes and the oakmoss and papyrus on his skin. His palm caressed her throat, and she shivered against him, pressing herself closer and tangling her fingers in his hair.

The kisses were slow and deep and so familiar. She knew this. This heat in her abdomen, the catching sensation in her chest, and the thrum in her veins. It was the most intimate and treasured thing she'd ever known. She'd hidden it away where it couldn't be taken, buried it until she lost it within her own mind.

She wanted it back.

Her hand on his chest began sliding along it, running down his torso. His hand closed around hers and stilled it. When she tried to pull it free, he stopped kissing her.

"What are you doing?"

Hermione sat back and looked down at him, drawing a deep breath. "I want to try to have sex with you."

She watched his eyes as she said it.

His irises darkened as his corneas bloomed, but his expression grew hard and closed. "No. That's not happening."

Hermione looked down at her hand in his. "I don't want the last time I had sex with you be when you were—" her mouth twitched, "when it was—forced."

Draco was silent for a moment.

"No."

Her fingers spasmed, and she withdrew her hand from where he'd stopped it, giving a short nod. "Alright."

She lay down and rested her head on his shoulder, pressing her face into the heat of his body that radiated through his shirt.

They said nothing for several minutes.

"Why?" he finally asked.

"I told you."

"You always have more reasons than one."

She was quiet and pressed herself more tightly against his side. "I can't remember what it felt like to have sex before," she finally said. "I know we were together, but it's so far away, like something in the distance that I can't make out the details of. When I try to remember—I just—I just remember what it was like here, when you had to every month. So I thought—" she paused and was silent for

several moments.

There were so many ways it could go wrong. It wouldn't be the way it was in the past, it would be tinged and affected by everything that happened. She might panic or find that once they reached a certain point, she was unable to back out or ask him to slow down or stop. She might have a seizure.

It might destroy the fragile safehaven they found in each other, the sense of security she found in him.

It might poison the past.

She curled more tightly against him. "Never mind."

Draco didn't say anything.

She fell asleep listening to his heartbeat.

However, after that conversation, the way he kissed her was different. His hands lingered longer. His kisses weren't just searing adoration but something else.

Something hungrier.

Something she could feel in her blood.

When he returned after being gone for two days, his touch felt like fire. His hands tangled in her hair, she drew his left hand down, along her neck to the base of her throat and then further along her body. She felt him inhale so sharply through his teeth that the air moved against her skin.

She gave a shivering moan.

"Tell me to stop," he said, his mouth hot against her throat. "Tell me to stop."

She tangled her fingers in his robes and pulled him closer. "Don't stop," she said, "I don't want you to stop."

His teeth dragged across her skin as he nipped at her throat. She pulled his hand up to the buttons of her dress and started undoing them. His fingers brushed along her bare skin, and he peppered open-mouthed kisses across her shoulders.

This was good.

This was familiar.

He used to touch her this way. She could remember this.

He kissed down her sternum until her head dropped back and she was gasping. His hands slid over her shoulders and up her spine. Her hands followed along the curve of his jaw, and down over his shoulders, trying to touch all of him. The sense of touching him was buried in her—a dormant, physical sense of familiarity that made her heart race as it was reawakened.

She drew his mouth back to hers and kissed him more deeply. "I love you," she said against his lips. "I love you. I wished I'd told you a thousand times."

She started unbuttoning his shirt and pushing it off, running her hands across his skin.

“Tell me to stop, and I’ll stop,” he said against her lips.

“Don’t stop.”

Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she closed her eyes and focused on the sensation. The weight, and warmth, and sensation of his skin against hers. She breathed in against his shoulder and traced her fingers over the scars on his back. *“Close your eyes.”*

She felt her clothes slip off and a coiling heat spread through her.

His hand brushed along the side of her breast. It felt different. Highly sensitive, as though his touch had run electricity through her body. She didn’t think it had ever felt that way before. She shivered into the contact and gave a low gasp. He dragged his thumb over her nipple, and her whole body shuddered.

She felt his mouth on the inside of her right breast.

Teeth.

She went rigid. Like being dunked into ice water, and suddenly the heat was gone.

She couldn’t—

Sharp, cold little rocks.

She wanted it to stop. She tried to breathe, but her lungs refused to expand. Just breathe, and it would go away.

Her throat closed. Her fingers twitched against Draco’s shoulders.

She couldn’t breathe. The memories were pouring over her in a rush.

“Just close your eyes.”

Better than Lucius. Better than Lucius.

She just wanted it to stop.

She tried to blink it all away, but it wouldn’t go.

“Stop,” she forced the word out.

Draco froze instantly and started to draw back. She gave a dry sob and wrapped her arms tightly around his shoulders, burying her face against his throat as she fought to breathe and willed her heart to stop pounding painfully in her chest.

Stop shaking. Stop shaking.

Draco sat immobile, not touching her. She couldn’t even feel him breathing.

She drew several slow breaths and shakily lifted her head to look at him. “I just—” her chest hitched, “It was too much for a moment. I think—I’ll be better now that I know I can say stop. It was good.” Her fingers on him tightened. “It was good—until it wasn’t…”

She swallowed hard.

Draco nodded. His pupils had contracted until his eyes looked like ice. His expression was tense and drawn as he looked at her.

He looked like something she could shatter in her hands.

If she ruined this, she might be destroying the last good thing he had.

She slipped her hand along the curve of his jaw and felt his pulse in the dip behind the bone as she pressed her forehead against his.

She wasn't going to cry, she told herself. She wasn't going to cry. They just needed more time.

She went to library. She had avoided it, but the elves were limited in their ability to cross-reference for her when she didn't know all the potential resources there might be there.

Topsy fidgeted beside her as Hermione stood in the doorway, hesitating and trying not to look up.

"I want to start in the Dark Arts section," she said.

"Which parts?"

"All of it. I want to see all the book titles."

Hermione kept her eyes fastened on the floor or the shelves as she moved through the library. Focus on the books. Focus on the words.

She had to save Draco. It didn't matter if she couldn't see the ceiling. She just had to breathe.

Sometimes repeating the reminder to herself worked.

Other times it didn't.

She woke up, dazed, in her room and every muscle in her body was burning. Draco was sitting beside her, her hand in his.

She stared at him in bewilderment, trying to remember how she'd gotten there.

"You had a seizure in the library," he said, expressionless. "You had a panic attack, Topsy couldn't calm you, and you had a seizure. A severe one, even with the interference of the anticonvulsant potion. I was in Austria."

Hermione didn't say anything. Her throat felt as though she'd screamed it raw.

Draco stared out the window for a moment and then sighed. He began to massage the centre of her palm without looking at it, tapping his wand across the pressure points until the muscles relaxed and her fingers unfurled. "You don't get to have everything, Granger. There's a point when you have to realise you aren't going to get everything you want, and you have to choose and let it be enough for you."

His hands stopped moving, and he just stared out the window for a minute. He swallowed slowly and turned to stare down at her. "The mind healer said if you have another seizure like that, you may cause irreversible brain damage to yourself and likely miscarry."

Hermione pressed her lips together and pulled her hand away, curling into a tight ball around her stomach.

“I can’t leave you behind,” she said, her voice thick. She felt the bed shift, and Draco brushed her hair off her face, tucking a curl behind her ear as he leaned over her.

He gave a low sigh as his hand slipped down from her hair and rested on her shoulder. “You’ll have other people to take care of. You promised Potter to take care of Ginny and James. You have a baby who needs you, and you know that.”

Her hand pressed against her stomach, and she gave a low sob. “I don’t want to choose.” Her voice was rasping, and it hurt to speak. “I always have to choose, and I never get to choose you. I’m so tired of not getting to choose you.”

He squeezed her shoulder before his hand slid down to hers, and he began messaging away the rigid knots in it. “You’re not choosing. You promised—anything I wanted, you promised that. Don’t—don’t break yourself trying to save me. I want that more than anything else. Get away from this fucked up world. Let me get you out, Granger. Let me know you’re safe, away from all this. Tell our daughter I saved you both. That—is what I want.”

She clumsily pushed herself upright; her arms were not cooperative, but she forced herself up and gripped his hand. “Draco—I’m so close. Give me more time, and I’ll find a way to remove your mark. I’m sure there’s a way. Please—don’t make me stop trying.”

Draco sat back and stared at her. His eyes flickered. “I’ve never known anyone as bad at keeping promises as you. You are—quite possibly—the worst promise-keeper I’ve ever met.”

Her throat tightened, but she pushed her chin up and met his stare. “I keep the ones that matter.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “No. What you do is make conflicting promises and then pick and choose which ones to keep depending on what you want. I’ve devoted some thought to your methodology—” His voice was light. Then lightness vanished, and he glanced away. “That’s why you never seem to keep any of the promises that I care about.”

Hermione looked down. “Draco—”

“Hermione.”

She looked up at him. He still used her name so rarely.

He stared at her, his expression serious and tired. “You care about this baby. She was all you cared about before your memories came back. Protecting her was all you thought about, every minute of the day. Now—you’re so preoccupied with trying to save me that you’re letting yourself forget that she needs you, that she’s dependent on you. I can’t protect her from you. Endangering yourself to try to save me is risking her.”

Hermione’s jaw trembled, and she looked down. “I’m so close, Draco. I’m just missing one piece.”

Draco gave a sharp sigh. “Granger, if you miscarry, the Dark Lord will have you brought in to examine your mind.” His voice was flat and matter-of-fact, and she flinched at the words. “You promised—if it stressed you, you promised you’d stop. How many panic attacks are you up to since you started going into library by yourself?”

She ground her teeth together, setting her jaw. “It’s so stupid. It’s stupid that it won’t go away. I’m so close—I’m almost sure I can figure it out, but the harder I try to put the pieces together, the worse

it gets. But I'm so close—what if I wait and don't figure it out until it's too late?" Her chest started spasming, and she pressed her hand against her sternum.

Draco gripped her by the shoulders, his expression hard. "Let it go." His teeth flashed as he spoke. "I was never supposed to be someone you tried to save."

Hermione shook her head doggedly, "What am I supposed to do if you make me stop?"

Draco's lip curled as though he wanted to snarl at her. She didn't blink. His hands dropped away from her shoulders, and he gave an exasperated sigh.

"Fine," he said in a resigned voice. "You can continue researching in your room. But if you want to go into the library, you will wait and go with me. I will have Topsy restrain you if you try to go alone. Understood?"

Hermione gave a small nod.

She stayed in her room for the most part. Whenever he had time, Draco took her outside to walk and then to the library, standing next to her and watching as she spent hours browsing. He cast analytic spells on his arm for her to study and wrote notes for her.

She was waiting outside the library doors for Draco to return for the evening when she heard two successive cracks of apparition in the foyer down the hall.

Her stomach immediately dropped.

No one should have been able to enter the estate unless Draco permitted it. If Draco were bringing someone back without warning, it was likely Severus, which meant she'd run out of time. Or else Draco had died, and the protections on the estate had collapsed.

Her heart was in her throat as she shrank back into the shadows and strained to hear.

"There has been a notable decline in your performance of late. The Dark Lord wishes to transfer the task to someone with less conventional methods." Lucius Malfoy's blood-curdling drawl floated down the hallway.

Hermione went cold with terror.

"One less matter for me to attend to. I'm hardly lacking in attention currently." She heard Draco say in a cool voice.

In the silent, empty house, the voices filled the foyer and bounced down the hallway. She could hear every word clearly. "Indeed not. It seems I cannot pick up a paper without finding your face splashed across it. My son, the infamous High Reeve."

Draco made no reply. "I must admit, I aspired to see my heir achieve slightly more than an international reputation as a mass murderer. A pity you couldn't maintain your anonymity. You're more a hunting dog than a protege." Hermione could hear the sneer in Lucius' tone.

Hermione began inching slowly down the hall, her fingers pressed against the wall.

"Why Father, I thought I'd inherited my exceptional talent for murder from you. I am, after all, the Dark Lord's humble servant, like my father and his father before him." Draco's voice was taunting,

but Hermione could hear the tension hidden in his tone, the reserve.

“There is an art in the contributions my father and I made. Using Unforgivables is merely pouring out an excess of emotion. Agony is meant to be an art form. There is no craft in the service you provide the Dark Lord. You have allowed yourself to be used as a blunt-edged weapon. Of all the skills you could cultivate… I find your choices—disappointing.”

There was a concealed passage in the wall nearby. If Hermione could just reach it, she could hide. Wait there until Draco came for her.

“There is also less blood on my clothes,” she heard Draco say with a dismissive drawl.

“Do you think the Dark Lord achieved greatness simply because of the quantity of Killing Curses he could cast? Do you think such an ability launched Gellert Grindelwald to infamy? Greatness is more than merely raw power. It requires drive, cunning, and inspirational vision. You’re a fool to think your fame as an executioner gives you true significance. You have no followers. No one is loyal to you. Fear is not enough; the Dark Lord learned that painful lesson during the first Wizarding War. The key to his success was his ability to expand his vision when he returned to power. An executioner is little more than a footnote. The Dark Lord gave you the opportunity to apprehend the last Order member. It would have immortalised you in history, but after four months—”

The floorboard under Hermione’s foot creaked, and Lucius’ voice stopped. Hermione froze, her heart in her throat.

“Is there someone here, Draco?”

Chapter 5

Hermione stared wide-eyed as the silhouette of Lucius filled the entrance to the hallway.

His eyes swept along the walls and alighted at the spot where Hermione was huddled. He stared at her for a moment before beginning to stalk forward slowly. Draco appeared beside his father.

Don't blow your cover. Don't blow your cover, Draco. Hermione repeated the thought in her head like a mantra as Lucius closed in on her.

Lucius felt like a dragon in human skin. He moved down the hall towards Hermione with an indirect and sinuous pace, like a serpent; as though he were daring her to run.

His eyes were bright and glittering as he closed in.

"You recall the repopulation program? I'm required to keep a surrogate. Didn't I mention my impending fatherhood?" Draco's expression was cold but intent as he eyed Hermione. He moved his head faintly, as though to warn her not to move.

"Ahh yes. The Mudblood that The Daily Prophet wrote about. I'd forgotten she was here." He stood mere inches away from Hermione as he looked her over. The Dark Magic hung around him like a cloak and it caused her stomach to roil as her body broke out in a cold sweat. She pressed herself more tightly back against the wall.

Lucius prodded her head back with his wand until her eyes met his. His pupils were blown wide; there was only a shard of silver encircling them. "A little mouse caught in a serpent's nest."

Hermione felt her robes shift as Lucius' hand slid lightly along her body. "Do you enjoy her, Draco? Does the commonness appeal to you? I imagine after so many years of being forbidden, there must be a novelty in exploring a Mudblood's filth. It would explain why your wife has wandered so far from her marriage bed. Did your little toy make you crave things a pureblood wife would have better breeding than to indulge?"

Lucius' voice dropped into a predatory purr as he drew closer to Hermione. He smelled of cardamom and leather, but it was masked beneath the coppery fetid scent of old blood. Hermione's tongue curdled, and her throat contracted as she tried to swallow.

"Let's see what assets you have, to keep my son in Britain while his wife entertains in France."

Don't blow your cover. Don't blow your cover. She felt the buttons over her bust come undone. She shook imperceptibly, and a small whimper almost escaped her, but she kept it in. Her eyes sought out Draco, trying to warn him off.

He was standing frozen behind his father, his eyes burning with rage.

Don't—don't—don't—

Lucius' hand closed around her throat, and he gave a low, shaking laugh. It wasn't short. The laughter continued on and on rather than stopping. Every time Hermione thought he might stop, he continued his low, relentless, mirthless noise. His fingers were still wrapped around her neck as though he might snap it, and she felt every vibration. "Why, Draco..." he finally said, glancing over

his shoulder. “She’s attached to you.”

Draco’s expression instantly curved into a cruel, gloating smirk as he met Lucius’ gaze. “Yes, she is.”

He reached past Lucius, took hold of Hermione’s arm, and pulled her firmly out of his father’s grasp.

Draco glanced at her before looking back to his father. “Past torture left her unstable and caused rather extensive memory loss. The Dark Lord has a particular interest in the information he believes she possesses. He wants her kept safe here at the manor until I can extract it.” He gave a thin smile. “It only took a few months and she’s grown quite attached to her captor. I’m all she has in the world.” He stared intently down at Hermione and smirked. “Aren’t I, Mudblood?”

Hermione didn’t need to feign the way her jaw trembled or the rapidly increasing speed at which her chest was starting to hitch as she gave a small nod. Her hand was shaking as it rose up, and she pulled her dress closed.

Draco looked down at her. His mouth twisted derisively. “Calm down and breathe. My father is hardly going to find someone like you worth looking at.”

Lucius was watching with avid amusement. She forced herself to remember it as she met Draco’s vicious gaze and felt herself shriveling inside.

“She generally keeps to her room aside from her daily walk. She must have been pining after me to have wandered so far.” Draco’s lip curled.

His expression grew cold as he eyed his father. “The Dark Lord does not want her tampered with—by anyone—regardless of how amusing it may be. There are strict rules regarding the surrogates. Maintaining her and recovering the memories she lost is regarded as paramount. You’ll excuse me; I have to take her back to her room in order to assure she doesn’t have a mental breakdown somewhere along the way.”

Draco started to pull Hermione down the hallway but then paused and looked back at Lucius. “Your wing of the manor has been maintained. I believe Astoria redecorated at some point last year. Come, Mudblood.”

He dragged Hermione forcefully down the hallway, moving so rapidly she could barely keep on her feet as she clutched her dress closed and tried to breathe.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Lucius watching them depart, an unreadable expression on his face.

As soon as they got into the North Wing, Draco stopped and pulled her tightly into his arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He turned her face upwards so he could look at her. His hand was warm against her skin as he studied her face, brushing her hair back from her eyes. “He arrived without any warning. Are you alright? I’m so sorry.”

“I’m fine—I’m fine—” Hermione forced out the words as her chest kept spasming and she struggled not to starting crying. “I was just afraid he’d do something and you’d blow your cover.” Draco’s hand slid possessively into her hair at the base of her head, and he pulled her closer. “He won’t go

near you. I will kill him if he ever touches you again. I'll tell the Dark Lord he snapped, and I had no choice."

Hermione buried her face in Draco's robes and squeezed her eyes closed. She'd been doing so well. She'd been staying calm, she hadn't panicked in days, but now she felt as though her legs had been violently kicked out from beneath her.

Draco gave a sharp angry sigh. "Of all the times for the Dark Lord to recall him."

Hermione swallowed and looked up. "He's here to track down the person responsible for destroying the horcrux, isn't he? The last Order member. That's what he said."

Draco was silent for several damning seconds as he met her eyes.

"He is," he finally said, his jaw dipping slightly. He reached out gently and rebuttoned her dress. "The Dark Lord has been disappointed by my failure to apprehend the person responsible. He's recalled my father to Britain to reassign the task."

Hermione's throat went dry. "What—what does that mean?"

The corner of his mouth quirked, and his fingers rose up and ghosted across her cheek. "I don't imagine he'll find anything before you leave. It will hardly matter after that. You'll stay in your room; it won't be for long."

Hermione flinched and shook her head. "I have things I need to look for in the library. I was waiting for you because I had an idea—"

"Hermione." He cut her off with a hard voice, and his hand withdrew. "My father will be living in the manor for the foreseeable future. It's hardly a coincidence he was recalled now once Dark Lord no longer has your memories to use. I'll accompany you for walks, I can excuse it as being medically necessary. However, my father is both unstable and unpredictable. He cannot be trusted or expected to follow the Dark Lord's instructions reliably when he gets an idea in his head. Anything he sees, the Dark Lord may see."

Hermione swallowed and tried to speak.

Draco gave a low sigh, and his shoulders dropped. "I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. I'll bring books to you. I know that's not what you want. If I could do better, I would."

He stared across the hallway for a moment. "I'll take you to your room now. Then I should go. I can't appear to be spending my time with you any longer."

Hermione's heart felt like lead as she followed him through the halls and watched as he inspected and tested the wards on her room for several minutes before leaving.

Lucius' presence in the manor felt like poison in the air. Narcissa was wan and skittish in her portrait, but she continued her constant vigil over Hermione. Topsy appeared in the evening, her hands covered in burns, and her head bruised purple across the forehead, the skin split in multiple locations.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, horrified as she lightly held the tiny, wizened hands in hers and took in the damage.

Topsy withdrew her hands and concealed them behind her back. “Master Lucius is not liking the redecoration of the South Wing. He is ordering all the elves be punished,” Topsy said, averting her eyes.

“But—but he’s not your master anymore. Draco is the Lord of the estate now.”

Topsy looked up at Hermione with her enormous eyes. “Elves is tied to the magic. Master Lucius is still being a Malfoy.”

Hermione let out a sharp breath. “But Draco supersedes him. If Draco says not to, a house-elf’s highest law is their master’s bidding, you shouldn’t have to punish yourself if Draco says not to. Why didn’t he tell you not to?”

Topsy shifted and rubbed a foot against her leg. “The house-elves is not to be doing anything that would be making Master Lucius think Master Draco is not liking to be a Death Eater. Master Draco must always be a most loyal son to Master Lucius who is very much liking to be a Death Eater. That is most important.”

“What did he do to you?” Hermione said, drawing Topsy’s hand from behind her back. They were blistered and raw.

“Topsy was to iron her hands for one minute each and strike herself ten times with a coal bucket.” Topsy twitched a bony shoulder. “Topsy is being alright. Master Lucius is never liking elves, Topsy is used to it from the years ago.”

Hermione’s throat felt thick, and her eyes burned as she swallowed. “I wish I could heal you.” Her mouth twisted. “I used to be a healer—back when I had magic. Do you have potions? I have some murtlap essence. It’s not very much, but it will soothe the burns and help the bruising.”

Topsy patted Hermione gently on the cheek. “The elves is having Potions, but if we is using them too soon, Master Lucius is wanting to punish us again.”

Draco was visibly pale and tense when he came to her room later that night. He walked rapidly across the room, held her face in his hands, and studied her eyes the way he used to during the war.

“I made it clear to him that you’re pregnant and that the Dark Lord is using it as a mechanism to recover your memories,” he said after a minute. “I don’t imagine he’d hesitate to harm you despite the rules regarding surrogates, but the Dark Lord’s specific interest in the pregnancy will hopefully be enough.”

Hermione raised her hand to his cheek. He was worryingly cool to touch. “What did you do, Draco?”

He shrugged her hand off. “I added a few more wards. I want to know if he tries to access the North Wing. It would raise his suspicion if I kept him out entirely, but I can slow him enough to get here first.”

“You used blood magic, didn’t you? You look ready to faint.” She pulled him towards the bed. “Sit down. Topsy! I need a Blood Replenishing Potion. I’m sure you have them.” She pressed her fingertips against his pulse. “And a strengthening potion.” She pulled his wand out of its holster on his arm and slipped it into his hand. “Cast a diagnostic for me. I need to know how much blood you used.”

He waved his wand, and she studied the results carefully. When Topsy reappeared, Hermione asked for several restoratives.

She watched him carefully as he took the potions and the colour slowly return to his features. She pressed her hand again his cheek and felt the warmth seep back into his skin as she pressed her lips against his forehead. “I won’t go out of my room without you. You don’t need to worry.”

His shoulders slumped with exhaustion and he gave a slow nod.

Draco arrived after lunch for her daily walk. As they stood at the doorway of her room, she looked at his hand. “I suppose we shouldn’t touch anymore. Just walk, like we used to last winter.”

He nodded, his expression tense.

They walked through the rose garden. The buds were just starting to bloom.

As they came around the side of the manor, they both froze. There was a wide trail of blood leading from iron gates of the estate; the white gravel was soaked in it. Lucius stood at the front doors of the manor with a centaur at his feet.

The centaur had been struck in the torso with the necrosis curse; the rot was slowly spreading across the stomach. The tendons in every leg had been brutally severed. The centaur was moaning quietly and kept struggling to stand, his skin grey from blood loss. The centaur tried to push himself up from his knees and collapsed heavily to the ground with an agonised groan.

Lucius was dressed in leather and dripping blood. His pale hair was stained red. “Ah, Draco… I had hoped you were here. Put your Mudblood away. If you could change the wards to allow me to take captives directly to my wing, that would be useful. Then I won’t be obliged to drag them across the estate.”

“Setting up a zoo, father?” Draco stood surveying the scene with a carefully closed expression.

Lucius snorted. “This beast came from the Forbidden Forest. I’m sure it knows something about where that arrow came from, or if it doesn’t, it can tell me who does.”

Hermione chest contracted painfully as Lucius continued “Unfortunately they’re such uncooperative creatures, I expect the process will require—persuasion.”

Draco sighed and raised an eyebrow. “There are prisons you could interrogate in. It keeps the blood off the gravel.”

“Ah yes,” Lucius said, waving his wand around in lazy circles. His voice became vaguely singsong. “The prisons. The prisons full of guards and ambitious Death Eaters eager to see our family toppled. Those prisons. Perhaps if you were more careful, you would have apprehended our quarry by now. Why should I use a prison when I have my very own redecorated wing of the manor? No. The manor will do very well. It’s been so long since I’ve been home. Now, Draco, perhaps you could be so good as to transport my project the rest of the way. Unless you prefer I drag it through the halls as well.” There was a pause as Draco stood between Hermione and his father.

“Topsy,” Draco called, his voice hard.

Topsy appeared before Draco with a pop. Her bruises had faded to yellow and green.

“Take the Mudblood back to her room and see that she stays there.” Draco unbuttoned the cuffs of his sleeves and rolled them up. “I have more important matters to attend to.”

Topsy bobbed and took Hermione’s hand, leading her quickly away. Hermione glanced over her shoulder and watched Draco walk towards his father, his wand dangling from his fingertips.

Hermione has been in her room only half an hour when the screaming started.

Even from the other end of the manor, the sound was audible. Inhuman agony reverberated through the house as though it were emerging from the walls. Narcissa started violently, jumping to her feet, her face turning grey as she gave a choked gasp of horror.

It was the first sound Hermione had ever heard from the portrait.

“It’s—it’s a centaur,” Hermione said. “Lucius caught it.”

Narcissa stared at Hermione for a moment and then dropped back into her chair, her hands falling to her lap.

The screaming kept going on and on.

Hermione looked away and tried to swallow, but her saliva was sour. Her hands were shaking as she tried to turn the page in her book. The words swam before her eyes.

She wondered if it was the flaying curse. The way the screaming continued on and on reminded her of Colin.

The book slipped from her fingers and onto the floor. She barely noticed.

She wished she had her occlumency. Or a least the ability to put her mind back together so that all the deaths didn’t stay so forefront.

She pressed her hands over her eyes and tried to clear her mind.

All the blood. There would be so much blood. And skin. And muscle. Eventually organs. Layer after layer. To the bones.

She wanted to go huddle in the corner of her room. To hide from the sound and the knowledge that it was happening and she had no ability to do anything about it.

If she tried to do anything, tried to go and beg Draco to stop it, it would endanger him, her, their daughter, Severus, Ginny, James.

She started across the room towards the corner, trying not to listen to the screaming that wouldn’t stop.

As she went, she glanced towards the portrait. Narcissa’s expression kept flinching, as though she were trying not to cry as she sat stoically in her chair. Hermione stopped and hesitated for a moment before stepping towards the portrait.

Hermione extended her hand. Her fingers spasmed as she rested them against the canvas. Narcissa looked up at Hermione, and her expression was stiff. Her nose scrunched up, and her lip curled defensively as she drew back in her chair.

Hermione waited.

Then Narcissa's blue eyes flickered, and her mouth twisted as her jaw trembled. She moved to the edge of her chair and extended her hand until her painted fingers rested on the canvas beneath Hermione's.

Hermione stood at the portrait until the screaming stopped.

Once the manor fell silent, Hermione's hand slipped away from the frame, and she turned away. Her stomach felt so twisted it was as though she were being strangled from the inside. She made her way dazedly over to her bed and stood beside it for several minutes. She could still hear the screams, as though they were tattooed into her eardrums.

She curled up tightly in the corner between the bed and the wall and stared blankly at the floor.

She blinked and found Draco kneeling in front of her. His expression was hesitant and worried, his eyebrows furrowed as he studied her, his mouth set in a thin, flat line.

He was wearing different clothes, and she could tell he'd showered. His hair was combed back and still damp.

She stared at him in silence. She didn't know what to say.

His expression grew more and more drawn as he met her eyes.

He didn't reach towards her. He didn't speak. They simply looked at each other and felt the weight of it all.

He seemed to be waiting for her to initiate something, to reach for him or look away.

"Did it say anything that could incriminate you?" Hermione finally asked.

Draco's eyes flickered, and she saw his knuckles whiten. "No. I covered my tracks already."

Hermione's mouth twitched, and she gave a small nod.

"Everything you do is on my head too. Every spell."

"It's late. Will you eat tonight?" Draco asked, studying her.

Hermione looked over at the clock. It had been early afternoon when Draco had taken her outside, now it was seven o'clock.

She'd lost the whole day. She hadn't made any progress researching. She hadn't even brainstormed. She'd just stood in cold horror in front of a portrait and listened as a centaur was tortured to death.

She never managed to do anything. Not before her memory returned. Not after. She was a shadow of the person she'd been before. Like the portrait of Narcissa that hung on the wall, she was just a scarred shadow of someone Draco loved. Her jaw trembled. "Hermione…"

She looked back at Draco.

His expression was devastated as he watched her. He started to reach for her but then stopped and withdrew his hand. "Will you eat?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. His eyes flickered, but he looked unsurprised.

He stood up, glancing away from her. “I’ll send Dreamless Sleep. My father is expecting me to go to dinner tonight. Let Topsy know if you need anything.”

That was all he said before he left.

She should research more. It was what she should do.

She didn’t move.

Topsy appeared with a vial of Dreamless Sleep which she placed beside Hermione without a word.

Hermione was still sitting in the corner beside the bed when the clock down the hall struck midnight and Draco appeared silently in the room.

“You’re still awake.”

“I wanted to know when you came back.” She stood up.

She stepped closer and buried her face in his robes. It was barely more than a week until the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts.

He rested a tentative hand on her head.

She looked up at him, watching the way his silver eyes shone in the dim light.

She forced herself to manage a wan smile. “Come to bed. It’s cold without you.”

“Severus is expected to arrive within the next six days,” Draco said while they were wandering through the hedge maze.

Hermione felt her stomach drop. “Oh.”

She didn’t know what to say. She walked blindly until she hit a dead end and then stood staring at the wall of yew, swallowing and trying to think of something to say.

She finally turned and looked at Draco, standing behind her. “Can I go to the library one more time? Just once. I just want to look one more time.”

Draco stared at her for a moment and nodded. “My father is gone for the day. I’ll take you.”

She felt his eyes on her as she wandered from aisle to aisle, as though there was a weight to his gaze.

She glanced over at him as she was pulling an encyclopedia of fifteenth-century arithmancy formulas down from the shelf, and her fingers wavered against the spine as she caught sight of his expression.

Wistful. To him, she was stealing time from them. If she didn’t find anything, it was all just wasted. All that time she could have had with him.

Her jaw trembled. She looked down and bit her lip as she slipped the encyclopedia off the shelf, as well as the four books beside it, adding them to a stack.

“These too.”

“I found what I was missing to remove your Dark Mark,” Hermione said when Draco walked through the door to her room after lunch the next day. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, empty-handed, her meal untouched.

He stopped at the door. “Oh?”

The corners of her mouth twitched, and she looked down at her hands.

“I figured it out with arithmancy. I even had Topsy write down all the numbers for me—to make sure I’d calculated it right.” Her voice was empty. She looked down, and her jaw trembled before she forced herself to look at Draco. “Phoenix tears. I’d be able to remove it if I had a vial Phoenix tears.”

She might as well have said she needed the moon.

Draco stood staring at her for a minute before he blinked.

Phoenixes rarely cried. When they did, it was always over an injury, not into a vial so that the tears could be saved or used in a potion. Trying to buy Phoenix tears would cost a fortune, and the buyer would be more likely to end up with watered down unicorn blood. It could take years to manage to track down a seller with actual Phoenix tears.

She swallowed and fidgeted, rolling the fabric of her robes between her fingers. “Maybe—if I start over, I can find something. I might have just come at it from the wrong angle...” She twitched and her shoulder jerked.

“Or—a bomb. I could build a bomb—like the ones I used at Sussex.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth and gnawed at it. “I think—I mostly remember how. If you bring me an analysis of the wards on Voldemort’s castle, I might be able to design a bomb for them. We could blow it up.”

Draco’s expression was closed, but his gaze was enragingly patient as he walked over to her. “Can you build a bomb without magic?”

Hermione swallowed, and her mouth twisted. “N-no... But—I could tell you how—”

“Can you safely handle the materials while pregnant?”

Her jaw trembled, and she realized that this was an idea he’d likely already considered and discarded at some previous point.

“No. But you could place wards around me, it would mute the effects and I can show you the techniques beforehand. We could work together—”

Draco picked up her right hand and pressed his left hand against it. His thumb and index finger both twitched faintly. Hermione’s entire hand spasmed against his.

“Which of us has hands steady enough to build a bomb?”

Hermione pulled her hand away, curling it into a fist so tight she could feel her metacarpal bones under her fingertips. She could feel the blood draining from her head, and she felt as though she might topple off the edge of the bed.

She pressed her other hand firmly against the mattress to steady herself. “Maybe I can—”

“Hermione, I’m tired.”

She looked up at him and saw it in his eyes.

The war had eaten him; there was so little of him left. The ghosts in his eyes, the war, it was almost all there was.

The other Death Eaters had retired from the war after the Battle of Hogwarts, but Draco hadn’t had the ability, had never been afforded the luxury. He had continued, because he couldn’t find her, because he’d made a vow to defeat Voldemort.

His best to defeat Voldemort.

His best.

Always his best.

Day after day. He just wanted an endpoint to look towards.

“Draco… I—”

He took her hand in his, running his thumb over her ring. “I would like to say goodbye to you before you’re leaving.”

Her throat caught as she stared up at him. Her jaw was trembling visibly, and he swam in her eyes when she nodded slowly and buried her face against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and sighed.

She wrapped her arms around him, but her mind raced.

The minute he left she went back to researching. She asked for more books from the house-elves. When he returned in the late evening, she’d put them all away. She didn’t mention it. She knew he knew anyway.

She kissed him. She pushed him back against the bed and slid her leg up until she was on his lap, her fingers threaded through his hair as she caressed his lips with hers.

She pushed his robes off his shoulders and unbuttoned his shirt, trailing her fingers along his clavicles and following them with her lips. Her hands slipped down his arms. She guided his hands to her waist and then pulled his mouth back to hers.

His hands gripped her. His thumb pressed against her lowest rib, and he arched her against his chest. His other hand rose up and wrapped around her throat, pulling her impossibly close and tilting her head back as he deepened the kiss. She started unbuttoning her dress. Her hands were trembling, and her fingers fumbled with the buttons. He drew back and tried to close his hands over hers. She jerked them free.

“I want this,” she said in a tight, shaking voice. “I want this. I want this on our terms before I go.” Her voice wavered. “This was ours...”

She swallowed and blinked hard before meeting his silver eyes. “It was ours.”

She twitched her shoulders, and her dress slipped off and pooled at her waist. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close and kissing him again.

She stayed astride him as they progressed, as things grew warmer and the world around them blurred away. There was nothing but Draco, his hands and eyes, the beating of his heart. She re-explored his body. He was different, he felt damaged in her hands. He had scars she didn't recognise, and his fingers twitched sometimes when he was pulling her closer and trailing his hands across her skin.

She laid against the length of his body, relishing the heat of him while his hand traced up the curve of her spine. He nipped along her shoulder until she gave a low moan and her body shuddered against his. She kissed down his throat and along his collarbones and took note of how he reacted, the ways he tensed and his breath caught, the way his fingers twisted in her hair and slid possessively down her throat. Mine. She could feel it in his touch, but he didn't say it.

Mine.

His eyes weren't like a wolf's. They were a dragon's, deadly and possessive. He stared at her as though she were all that mattered in the world. It made her blood burn.

Her thighs bracketed his hips as she sat astride him and shifted. She met his eyes. Her heart was pounding in her chest and her pulse was racing, and she knew he could feel it.

She drew his hands to her hips as she slowly lowered herself. His eyes turned black, and his jaw tensed as he gave a low hiss between his teeth, but he didn't hurry her as she paused and adjusted to the sensation and then rolled her hips forward.

It was—familiar, in both good ways and bad.

Over the table, she'd tried not to pay attention, not to how it felt, how it touched her inside, the sensation or the movement. She'd torn her mind away and focused on the bite of the table against her hipbones, the clock, the texture of the wood beneath her fingertips. Poetry. Potions. Anything else.

It had always been a matter of experiencing it as little as possible.

Now she wanted to notice what it was like. They were connected. He was in her and under her. His hands guiding her hips as she moved with him.

It was good. It had felt this way when they used to have sex, she was certain.

The heat of his touch was like a fire. It wasn't too fast or too much for her. He went as slow as she needed him to.

It used to be slow. She remembered that. Slow and intimate as he whispered against her skin. The burning reverence of his touch as he used to make love to her.

That's what it had been. Making love.

That's what they'd had.

Her eyes burned, and she dropped her head down as her shoulders shook.

“I love you.” She gripped his hand in hers so tightly it hurt. “I wanted my whole life to show you.”

Chapter 6

June 2005

Severus is coming. Severus is coming.

Hermione felt as though she were turning to lead. There was constant aching pain in her chest, and a stone seemed to be lodged in her throat; she felt it each time she swallowed.

A palpable sense of horror and despair spreading around and through her. It was as if she was drowning with the rising tide; the water had reached her face, sliding slowly across her skin, lapping a little higher each minute. She was locked in place and could do nothing but sit, feeling it draw over her.

She wanted her occlumency back.

Now that she remembered having it, she felt its loss. Death and mutilation, everyone she'd seen die, right in the forefront of her mind. It hadn't always been that way. There used to be space from the emotional agony, but now there wasn't.

Soon Draco would be another person who'd died because she couldn't save him.

She didn't think any amount of occlumency would ever make the pain of it fade.

If she could just occlude a bit, she thought she'd be able to say everything she felt she needed to say, to ask him what she wanted to know. Instead, each time she tried to broach the subject, her voice would break, her shoulders would begin shaking, and she'd start crying and then hyperventilating.

Draco would stoically let her cry and then wrap his arms around her and calm her when she started overbreathing.

She'd jerk away angrily.

She wanted to scream at him. *Stop accepting this. Stop being resigned. You're breaking my heart. Stop acting like it's alright. It's not alright. It's never going to be alright. Stop being resigned.*

It was easy to be angry at him—at least she was still trying. He was just going along with it.

She finally broke down and raged at him until she had a panic attack. *His plans were stupid and selfish. It wasn't fair that he got to die, and she was left to live with everything. If he'd just let her help him rescue Ginny, none of this might have happened. He should have let them work together. If he hadn't been so controlling and not tried to do everything by himself —everything might have been different.* He just stood there without a word while she vented it all. Until she started hyperventilating and collapsed on the floor with her arms protectively wrapped around her stomach. He shushed her and rubbed circles on her back while she cried and tried to shake him off.

"Don't do this to me, Draco. Don't do this. Don't—don't—don't—don't—"

Afterwards, he was called away, and she was left to seethe and obsess and realise he was doing it intentionally. He could read her thoughts. He knew the ways her mind tilted. Prior to Montague's attack, he'd gone out of his way to needle her and make her hate him. He'd given her a target,

something to focus on; a way to channel her stress. If she was angry at him, she was less self-destructive. Her rage dampened her guilt.

Then leaving would be easier for her.

She didn't want to be managed.

She swallowed her anger after that. She didn't want to waste the time she had by being angry.

But when she was alone, she wanted to scream and break everything within reach. The manacles physically prevented her from doing anything but cry. She was burning with rage, and devastation, and guilt without any capacity to channel it. She felt as though it was poisoning her from the inside, as though the emotions were corroding the blood in her veins.

She obsessively kept going through all the stacks of books that covered the floor of more than half of her room. If she read them enough times, maybe she'd have a breakthrough, maybe she might see something she'd overlooked before.

When Draco visited, she tried to ignore the fact she was leaving.

He had an unusual amount of availability leading up to the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. Lucius was responsible for "hunting", and executions had been placed on hold until the anniversary celebration.

Draco was able to spend most of his time with her.

She poured herself into him. She wanted every detail of him.

They made love several more times. After the first time, it was easier. She was confident that she could handle it, that she could stop if she needed to. She could communicate things to him physically that she struggled to verbalise without crying.

She could hold onto him and wish to never let go.

He held her in his arms and kissed down her body. He touched and tangled his fingers in her hair. He traced along her neck and shoulders as though he were measuring and memorising the way she fit in his hands. He pushed into her, and she stared into his eyes, watching the way they flickered and changed colour when the pupils dilated. Mine. Mine. Mine. She felt it like a heartbeat.

Mine.

To have and to hold...

She pulled his lips desperately against hers, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, tangling her fingers in his hair, absorbing the sensation of being with him, the rhythm of his heartbeat with her.

For better, for worse...

In sickness and in health...

She ran her fingers along his runes, feeling the implacable magic that resided there. She kissed each of his scars, and he kissed hers. They entwined their hands, brushing their noses together, and whispering to each other.

They took every moment slowly. They had barely any time left; they didn't want to waste it by rushing.

Afterwards, Hermione lay curled up in his arms, her back against his chest.

Home. This is what home feels like.

She took his left hand and pressed it against the swell in her lower pelvis.

"That's her," she said. "I'll—" her throat tightened, "—I'll probably be able to feel her move within the next month. The book says it feels like fluttering at the beginning."

Draco's fingers twitched in her hand, and he pressed a kiss on her bare shoulder.

She stared down, studying his hand beneath hers as it splayed across her stomach. "It's called quickening—when you first feel a baby move."

After lunch, Draco led her past the hedges running along the South Wing of the manor. As they walked around the hothouse, Hermione stopped with surprise. There was a stable of winged horses on the Malfoy estate.

She stood speechless at the doors and stared in at all of them; enormous Abraxans, Granians, and Aethonens. All of which stared down at her and Draco through barred stalls. They stomped their hooves and tossed their heads, nickering as Hermione ventured forward.

She reached up, and a dainty Granian fluttered its smokey wings and shoved its nose through the bars, nuzzling against Hermione's palm.

"I didn't know you had horses," she said as she stroked its muzzle and scratched at its ears. "I thought I'd explored most of the estate near the manor. I don't know how I didn't notice the stables." Draco was oddly quiet. She turned to look at him. He had an unreadable expression on his face as he studied her.

He tilted his head and seemed to be hesitating for several seconds. "You did know about them." His eyes dropped. "You used to come here daily during the winter. You stopped at the end of February."

Hermione stared at Draco, her fingers rubbing against the Granian's neck. The horse nearly knocked her over as it nosed at her robes.

She turned back and scratched at the swirl on its forehead while trying to wrap her mind around the revelation.

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. She swallowed and cleared her throat several times.

"Oh," she finally managed to say in a light voice after standing and smoothing the Granian's mane so it would lie flat. Her nose and eyes were burning from the dust and the sickly sweet scent of hay.

After a minute she nodded. "That makes sense."

She nodded again and cleared her throat. "I think I lost a few memories—I think during my first seizure." She kept fussing over the horse without looking back towards Draco. "It's—it's so interesting how memory works. There are probably a lot of things I don't even know I can't remember... It—" she had trouble thinking of what to say. "It must be very odd to watch."

“I don’t think it was your seizure,” Draco said from behind her. “It’s something the Dark Lord does. A legilimency technique, I suppose you could say. He tears apart memories. He’s talked about the method in the past. Little pieces of things; he takes them and shreds them apart. He—enjoys feeling the mental anguish the victims experience when they lose the memories.”

There was a pause.

“Coming here used to make you happy, so he took it from you.”

Draco summoned several apples from a bin nearby and sliced off a piece, handing it to Hermione. Hermione laid it on the flat of her palm and held it up. The Granian’s muzzle brushed and tickled against her skin as it huffed and ate.

“Were there other things?” she asked. “Other things that I don’t remember forgetting?”

“You had a memory of your father. He told you to fold a thousand paper cranes to get a wish. That was all I knew of.”

Hermione stood, feeling cold as she absorbed it. “I wondered—why I did that.” Several more horses pushed their heads through the bars of their stalls and tossed them up and down until Hermione moved from horse to horse, petting their noses while she bribed them into quietude with apple slices.

She could feel Draco watching her, and it made her stomach knot as she tried to calculate why he’d brought her there.

“So—why do I need to know about the horses?” she asked as she scratched the ears of an Abraxan whose head was the size of an elephant’s.

Draco handed her another apple slice before he answered.

“With sufficient resources, portkeys and apparition leave traceable signatures. Apparition and brooms don’t go far enough, fast enough. Granians fly faster than any other magical creature. You’ll be flying horseback from the manor to Denmark. There’s a safehouse there with an international portkey; it will take you to Ginny.”

Hermione nodded again, withdrawing from the horses and walking past Draco without a word. Of course, it was just another step towards her departure. It seemed like everything he did was just an additional phase in his goodbye process.

They were heading back to the manor when Draco stiffened and froze, his expression becoming a mixture of disbelief and rage. Hermione stared up at him nervously.

Lucius—

“Astoria has just apparated into the foyer,” he said.

A feeling of cold washed over Hermione. Compared to Lucius, Astoria was a minor inconvenience, but the combination of both of them was horribly ill-timed.

Draco scoffed and looked heavenward. “Why is it that nothing ever goes wrong by halves?” He stood for several seconds with his eyes unfocused. When they cleared, he snorted angrily. “Yet another person I’ll have to deal with.”

His left hand strayed towards his wand holster as he stalked towards the manor, the gravel crunching loudly under his shoes.

Hermione followed him, and a sinking sensation came over her as it occurred to her that Draco had likely been expecting to have to kill Lucius ever since his father's return, and now Astoria was on that list as well.

In the case of Astoria, it was not surprising. But Draco had protected his father over the years, Hermione was certain of it. It would have been far easier for Draco to have orchestrated Lucius' death at some point than to account for his father's constant unpredictability.

Draco paused in the rose gardens and scowled. "She's headed to the veranda to meet us." He rolled his neck so that it cracked, straightening as his expression schooled itself into one of indolent viciousness. He sauntered around the corner of the manor, Hermione following a few subservient steps behind him. Astoria was waiting for them, her hands on her hips.

The corner of Astoria's mouth twisted upwards as she stared down the steps at Draco and Hermione. She lifted a thin shoulder. "How did I guess I'd find you two together out here?"

"I imagine you asked a house-elf," Draco said as he ascended the steps and looked her over coolly. "I thought you were spending the summer in France, Astoria. Did they cast you out?"

Astoria's lips curled so that her teeth were briefly bared as she raised her chin. "I'm here for the celebration. You're going to be the guest of honor. Do you realize how much people will talk if your wife doesn't attend with you?"

Draco raised his eyebrows skeptically, and Astoria glanced over at Hermione.

"What? Were you going to take her? Sit her on your lap and fondle her publicly the way Amycus does with his?" She rolled her eyes. "No. That's hardly your style. You can't keep her under a mountain of wards if she's let out in public."

Astoria tossed her head. "I'm not required to get permission to return to my own home. I'm here to appear beside my beloved husband. People are beginning to talk."

Astoria's expression was growing pinched, and her lips pursed briefly as she stared resentfully up at Draco. "Not that you ever pay attention, but they do talk about you so very much." Her voice was saccharine. "I find myself unable to do anything but answer the endless questions about you when I go out. They all want to know when you'll visit me." She gave a laugh like shattering glass. "Adrian joked at a party that you've been staying here in England because your paternal side is starting to come out, and then the whole room laughed because everyone knows the only thing you do is kill things."

Draco's mouth quirked at the corner. "Well—I'll be rather busy for most of it. You'll spend most of the event with my father. I don't believe you two are acquainted."

Astoria's brittle expression rippled as a flash of uncertainty appeared on her face. "Really? Lucius? He's back in Britain?" Then her expression sharpened, and she glared at Hermione. "Because of her?"

Draco followed his wife's gaze and stared at Hermione with hardened eyes. "Hardly. The Dark Lord has recalled him to assume some of my duties now that my new status has so many demands upon

my time.”

Draco’s mouth twisted into a mocking smirk. “He’s a touch eccentric now, my father, but you both share certain interests; perhaps he’ll like you.” He shrugged and looked Astoria over once again before summoning Hermione up the steps with a quick movement of his hand. “Do keep out of the way, Astoria, if you possibly can.” He started towards the doors, and Hermione followed him, trying not to make eye contact with Astoria.

As Hermione passed, Astoria spoke up in a low voice “He’s going to kill you.”

Hermione froze briefly, and Astoria continued. “Didn’t you know? You’re dead—as soon as that baby’s out of your belly. The Dark Lord wants your corpse. I hope he does something foul with it.”

“Astoria, didn’t I say something a few months ago about talking to the Mudblood?” Draco drawled dangerously from the doorway.

Astoria paled and stepped back

“Mudblood,” Draco’s voice was sharp as a blade. “Come before I drag you.”

Hermione continued towards Draco, feeling Astoria’s eyes on her back.

When they got inside her room, Hermione drew a deep breath and turned, folding her arms tightly around herself. “Tell me the whole plan. I need to know—I need you to tell me the whole plan.”

Draco closed the door firmly and stood in front of it. His eyes were calculating as he stared at her. After a moment he looked down and straightened his cuffs.

“Assuming Severus doesn’t arrive late, you’ll leave before the anniversary celebration. It will destabilise things more rapidly if I fail to appear during the event. It’s intended to be a show of strength; the Dark Lord will be hard-pressed to excuse my absence.” He waved his hand dismissively. “But—that’s all beside the point. Once your manacles are off, you and Severus will immediately fly to Denmark. He knows the location of the safehouse. When you’ve taken the portkey, he’ll return. If things go according to plan, his disappearance will have been unnoticed, and he’ll remain in place as long as he can.”

Hermione shook. “What about you?” She felt as though she were being crushed to death. “After I leave—what exactly happens to you?”

His mouth curved into a thin smile. “I’ll be making sure no one notices that Severus has gone missing for half a day. I’ll make an appearance of having tried to run with you, and leave another Death Eater to be found, who will be assumed to be the secondary party involved.” He sighed. “It was supposed to be Montague, given his known fascination with you. But there are other options I have in mind now.” He shrugged. “It’s a minor detail either way.”

“What happens to you?” Hermione said again.

He met her gaze seriously. “I won’t be captured, if that’s what you’re worrying about. I have too much information to risk interrogation.”

He glanced down and appeared to be inspecting the polish on the toes of his shoes. “Don’t worry. It’ll be quick." He looked up at her with a faint smile. "I’m rather good at making it quick.”

Hermione’s mouth twisted, and she turned away and went over to the window.

She’d thought she’d run out of tears during her imprisonment beneath Hogwarts, but now she found herself constantly fighting them back.

She could feel him walking up behind her until his robes brushed against hers. She pressed her hand against the window and stared despairingly out across the estate.

It was a cage. The open sky and rolling hills were an illusion of freedom. In all the time she'd known him and been his prisoner, he'd been more chained in place than she was.

“I don’t want you to die, Draco.”

His left hand slipped around her waist and rested against her lower abdomen. She pressed her lips together, but her jaw still trembled.

“Draco—” her mouth twisted, and her cheekbones felt hollow and ached. There was a shriveling sense of despair in her chest. She dropped her forehead against the cold glass, “Don’t—don’t—I don’t want you to die...”

“I know.”

He slipped his other arm around her shoulders, and she pressed her cheek against the back of his hand.

She gripped the hand over her abdomen, and they stood in silence until he sighed and straightened. “I have to go. With Astoria here too—it’s not worth the additional risk.”

Hermione looked down at the floor and nodded. Her throat catching with guilt. They’d had less than a month, and she’d spent it researching. Now—the little bit of time left was cut short.

He withdrew his hands, and she felt him vanish.

He still came that night. After the lights in the manor were out, he appeared in her room.

“Well, my father and Astoria have met.” He rolled his jaw as he pulled off his outer formal robes. “He likes her even less than I’d expected. I suppose it would be more unfortunate if they seemed to like each other, but the antagonism over dinner was tedious in a matter of minutes.”

The corner of his mouth quirked upwards for a moment before his expression closed again.

“You can be here now?” she asked after a moment.

He nodded. “I’ll know if they come to my door. It’s more likely to be my father wanting a drinking partner than Astoria expecting to share my bed.” He seated himself on the edge of the mattress. Hermione's chest tightened and she looked down at her hands. Astoria's return to the manor placed a certain emphasis on Draco’s presence beside Hermione in bed.

He was married. He had a wife. Yet here he was in Hermione’s bed because she was—his mistress.

Or sex slave. That was her intended function, as a surrogate and sex slave.

Disregarding her imprisonment, she was still categorically his mistress.

She looked up to find Draco studying her and forced a smile. “No, I don’t suppose she will.”

They slept face to face. He held her almost crushed against his chest, and she could feel his heartbeat against her cheek.

He sat up in the middle of the night.

“My father’s wandering the manor,” was all he said before he apparated away without a sound.

He didn’t reappear until after lunch to “walk” Hermione. He was visibly tense and didn’t make any effort to converse as they strolled through the gardens. There was an additional sense of dread seated low in her stomach as they walked among the blooming roses. He kept scanning their surroundings and eyeing the manor, as though he expected an explosion to emanate from it at any moment.

“Draco!” Astoria’s sharp voice cut through the air.

The corner of Draco’s mouth lifted briefly as he turned to meet his approaching wife.

Astoria was pale-faced, but the hollows of her cheeks were stained red. She stormed through the garden beds. She was impeccably attired in pale green robes splashed with scarlet detailing. As she got closer, Hermione noticed that the hem and her shoes were scarlet red as well.

“Draco—Draco—this is—unacceptable!” Astoria appeared to be on the verge of tears and nearly at a loss for words. “Intolerable. Obscene. I don’t even—”

When she was within a few feet, Hermione realised Astoria’s robes were not detailed with red, they were spattered and stained.

As though she’d walked into a pool of blood.

“What is it, Astoria?” Draco drawled the question.

Astoria stood before Draco for several seconds, swallowing visibly. She looked down at her robes and back up to him.

“Your father has to go. He can’t stay here.” She choked. “He—he—he—” She gestured down at herself. “The entire foyer is covered in blood. There were things hanging from the chandelier—intestines, I think. It’s on the portraits and all the orchids I brought back from France, and my new robes! The whole room is ruined. Mrs. Thicknesse was supposed to come to tea with her daughters and several other ladies planning for the celebration—now I’m going to have to cancel because most of the house is smeared with blood, and Bobbin says there are corpses piled by the gate. Make him go.”

Hermione had barely been in the other wings of the manor since Lucius’ arrival; she had no idea if what Astoria said was true, or if she were exaggerating.

Hermione was certain Draco had added wards to her room after the day Lucius brought back the centaur. She could no longer hear any sounds through the doors or the windows. She’d seen bloodstained dragmarks outside occasionally when she and Draco walked, but once inside her bedroom walls, she was nearly oblivious to the world outside.

Draco sighed and straightened his robes. “Astoria, it’s traditional for him to live on the estate. He has a private wing of the manor.”

Astoria threw her hands into the air. “He’s not using his wing! He’s using the main gates and the

main entrance. There's blood all over the gravel. I had the elves replace it all this morning, and it's already covered again. The manor looks like a slaughterhouse."

Draco nodded, his expression impassive. "I am aware of the condition of the manor. There are reasons I didn't ask you to return for the celebration. If you insist on attending, there are other properties in Britain you can occupy for the next several days."

Astoria stared up at Draco, her eyes wide and incredulous. "Do you know how much people will talk if I'm receiving guests somewhere besides Malfoy Manor?"

Draco quirked an eyebrow and met her gaze coldly. "I didn't ask you to come, Astoria. He's in England on the Dark Lord's orders. You're here on a whim. Do you expect me to defer to your preferences?"

Astoria started to respond, but before she could speak—

"What is this? All my family together in one place. How joyous." Lucius had seemingly materialised from nowhere.

Astoria shrank towards Draco, who shifted away from her in order to place himself between his father's line of sight and Hermione. The movement was slight, as though he were simply turning to see Lucius, but Hermione was nearly concealed after he'd altered his stance.

"Father, Astoria is dismayed by the condition of the foyer."

"Really?" Lucius cooed the word as though he were speaking to a small child. "I thought it was a considerable improvement over the barren minimalism she appears so partial to."

Astoria was visible to Draco's right, and Hermione saw her pale. Her hands moved defensively towards her stomach and then stopped as she curled them into fists at her sides. "I want you to leave," she said in a sharp voice. Her earrings were trembling, but she lifted her chin. "I want you off the estate."

Lucius quirked an eyebrow and stared down his nose at her. "Indeed. You intend to banish me from my own estate?"

"It's not your estate, it's Draco's. It's mine. I am Lady of the Manor, and you are a guest who has abused his welcome."

"You are lady of this manor?" Lucius purred in a low voice. "My wife was lady of Malfoy Manor; I'm not sure the magic can tolerate such an inadequate replacement."

Astoria flushed, the hollows of her cheeks staining scarlet as her teeth flashed angrily. "It doesn't matter what you think. The Dark Lord chose me. Draco married me. I am the lady of Malfoy Manor. You aren't the one who gets to decide. I have done everything that has been asked of me. I lived, alone, in this horrible house, I fulfilled every role expected, I did everything asked, I never complained—even when I was taken for granted and then put aside and ignored"—Astoria sounded on the verge of tears—"I still played my part without a word of complaint because—"

"You do like to carry on, don't you?" Lucius sneered at Astoria. "Perhaps we'd pay more attention to you if you were quieter. I haven't heard a sound from the Mudblood since I arrived."

Draco's hand moved infinitesimally back towards Hermione.

"Get off this estate!" Astoria nearly shrieked. "Get off. Get off! Get—"

A razor-fine line of scarlet suddenly bloomed across the pale skin of Astoria's neck.

Hermione watched, eyes wide with horror. A sort of gasping, burbling sound emerged from Astoria's throat as her head toppled off her shoulders, and her body sank to the ground.

Lucius stared down at the fresh corpse at his feet, and his eyebrows arched approvingly. "You're much quieter now," he said, bending over and cocking his head at Astoria's face where it lay in the white gravel. Her expression had gone limp and blank.

Lucius wagged a finger towards her. "Stay like this and, in time, perhaps my opinion of you shall improve."

Hermione peered around Draco in shock.

Lucius straightened, sighing and tilting his head back in the sunlight. "The estate feels better already. My father used to say there's nothing like fresh blood to fertilise the roses."

"You've killed my wife, Father," Draco said. She couldn't see his face, but his voice was disbelieving.

"I am aware." Lucius snorted and he looked at Draco from the corner of his eye. "Don't bother trying to convince me that you'll miss her. She was tasteless and indiscreet. Now you can marry a woman capable of producing an heir. Did I tell you about the delightful young witch I met in Bulgaria this last winter? Pureblooded. Only sixteen, but she'll be of age once your obligatory period of mourning has elapsed. Then we'll no longer be obliged to sully our line by having Mudbloods paraded through the manor like a line of whores."

Draco's fingers twitched, and his shoulders grew rigid. "You realise I'd require permission to remarry."

"Indeed. Something more easily obtained when you don't already have a wife and surrogate on hand. In six months time, when the Dark Lord has the information he desires and the Mudblood is dead, things will be different. Someone has to worry over the future, given that you refuse to."

Draco shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "You can hardly expect this to go unpunished. The Dark Lord requires that he personally approve killing any members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight prior to their execution."

Astoria's blood was seeping across the ground towards Draco's shoes. He flicked his wand and vanished it.

Lucius twirled his wand lazily in his fingers. "I doubt the Dark Lord will mourn the loss of an infertile witch, regardless of her pedigree. Your value and mine remain considerably greater than hers. Once he hears how incessantly she talked, I expect I shall get off quite lightly."

Lucius knelt down easily and plucked Astoria's head up off the ground before snagging the arm of her corpse.

"Worry not. I shall assure the Dark Lord that you are deeply grieved by my impulsiveness. You may

hope otherwise, but I would advise you to expect my return within the hour. If you are still my obedient son, perhaps you will be so good as to have a pain relief potion ready for me."

Without another word, Lucius apparated away, taking Astoria with him.

Draco stood staring at the bloodstained gravel for several seconds before he turned to look at Hermione. His expression was masked.

Hermione stared up at him for several seconds, studying his eyes. Her chest was starting to ache. She drew a deep breath before she spoke. "You planned that."

He didn't react for a moment, then the corner of his mouth curled up. "Clever."

Hermione didn't smile back.

After a moment, his eyes flashed, his expression hardening as he looked away. "What did you expect, Granger? You can't possibly be surprised." He scoffed, and his nostrils flared. "She attacked you. She tried to gouge out your eyes."

Her throat hurt, and she flinched as she remembered the sensation of Astoria's wand digging into her eyeball and her utter terror when she thought she'd be blinded. "I haven't forgotten." Draco gave a short laugh. "I would have killed her sooner, but it diverted suspicion to have a pretty wife in the manor. Living here alone with you for so many months could have attracted attention. That was the only reason I let her live."

"I hate it when you kill people because of me," she said, turning sharply in the gravel so that it ground beneath her feet. She stared down at the bloodstained ground, her mouth twisting. "I hate it. I've always hated it. There's so much more to you, but sometimes I feel like all I do is bring out the worst in you. You would never go so far if it weren't for me. You wouldn't be like this. I did this to you."

Draco was silent for several seconds, and he sighed. "You're right. I don't imagine I would."

Hermione pressed her hand against her sternum. Her head felt light and hollow, and her chest ached as though she'd been struck, as though the bones were shattered and the shards were slowly cutting her to death.

"I used to have so many dreams for us," she said, her voice thick. "When I'd worry about you, when I'd do things that I didn't want to do, when the war felt so heavy I thought I'd finally break under it, I'd tell myself: someday you're going to run away with him. You'll go somewhere quiet. You won't ask for very much, just you and him and that will be enough. That's what I used to tell myself. I wanted to see what you'd be like away from the war. I thought—maybe we'd find out together. Who we could be without the war."

She smiled bitterly. "I suppose in the end, I'm just like Harry and Ron. I expect the universe to eventually give in a bit. I thought we'd earned each other. I thought we'd both suffered enough that we'd get to have each other."

Draco was silent.

She looked towards the manor. "I want to go back to my room now. I barely have any time left, I don't want to spend it in this rose garden standing in your wife's blood."

She started walking towards the house and froze, her throat closing when she realised she couldn't see Draco anymore. She turned sharply back and stood, staring at him for several seconds while her chest jerked.

She felt hollow. She'd poured herself out and now all she had left was a shell.

"How am I supposed to do this without you?" Her voice was shaking. She raised her hands and then let them drop limply at her sides. "I can't even go outside by myself. What's even the point in having me escape? I might have a seizure if I have to go without you."

Draco's expression was guarded, but his eyes flickered and the line of his mouth tensed. "You'll have your occlumency back, that should help."

Hermione stared at him.

He glanced away. "I'll have Dreamless Sleep you can take, if necessary. Severus is aware of your agoraphobia, and he's planned accordingly. You'll share a horse. He's someone you trusted."

Hermione released a sharp, angry breath. "Why are you so resigned to dying? Even at the beginning, when you made your offer to the Order, you were always planning to die like it wouldn't matter to anyone. Why are you still like that? Now—" her voice broke, "—when it does?"

Draco sighed, and his mouth twisted briefly as he met her eyes. He set his jaw and glanced away, his lips twitching. "I didn't have anyone, Granger. After my mother died, I didn't have anyone. My life was blown apart when I returned home after fifth year. Everything I did after that was trying not to lose the remaining pieces that I had. Once she died—it didn't matter. Revenge was all I could do to make up for it, and it didn't matter to anyone—"

He looked down.

"Not until you came along." He sounded almost bitter. He met her eyes and walked across the bloodstained gravel towards her. "I didn't make plans past the war. Potter was never going to win, I always knew that. Falling for you didn't change that—it just—it just—" he released a sharp breath and looked down, his voice growing quieter. "It just made knowing it worse."

His throat dipped as he swallowed and stared at her, and his mouth curved into a wistful smile. "I—loved how you believed in the future, even when you didn't expect you'd get to be a part of it. How you insisted we'd somehow defy the inevitable. You Gryffindors are such idealists—I never understood the appeal of it until you." He reached out and caught a curl with his fingers. "The way you thought we'd always be together, and talked about running away almost until the end. I would have done anything to give you what you wanted, but—" he gave a short laugh and shook his head as his hand dropped away from her. "I don't know how to do it. It's not for a lack of trying, Granger. I've run out of ideas." Hermione drew a low breath. The summer heat had mixed the coppery scent of blood with the honey-sweet scent of blooming roses. When the smell struck her, her tongue curdled and a wave of nauseous despair crawled up her throat. She pressed the back of her hand against her nose and turned away.

"I want to go back inside," she said after she'd forced away the urge to vomit.

Draco took her hand, and she dully let him lead her back to the manor.

Shortly after they arrived in her room, Draco was summoned. He conjured his Death Eater robes and

vanished without a word. He didn’t return for hours.

Something was wrong.

Hermione called Topsy, who appeared and informed her that Lucius had not returned either. Hermione paced in her room reviewing possibilities: Voldemort was upset over Astoria’s death, Voldemort had used legilimency on Lucius and noticed something that had betrayed Draco, something else had gone wrong that Hermione was too oblivious to guess.

She hovered at the door, but there was no point in going out. There was nothing she could do. She kept waiting.

She was standing by the window when the back of her neck prickled. She turned.

Draco was standing in the middle of the room, pulling his mask off.

He had an unreadable expression on his face, as though he were shocked and devastated.

His hair, skin, and eyes stood out starkly in the dark room making him look almost luminous. He stared at her for several seconds.

“The Dark Lord just received word—Romania has severed their alliance with the Dark Lord. They deposed the government and killed the Dark Lord’s emissaries—including Severus.”

Chapter 7

Draco looked away and shook his head. “What is the point of legilimency if you don’t use it to keep someone from killing you?” He scoffed, the sound harsh and angry in the back of his throat. “He survived as a spy through two Wizarding Wars only to be killed by an insurgent vampire coven.”

Hermione could feel the cold rage starting to emanate from him.

She swallowed. The news felt like a concussion. After days of dreading Severus’ arrival, of regarding it as a foregone conclusion, his sudden absence felt like seismic shift. Everything had been thrown into the air, and there was no telling how it would land.

“Is it confirmed that he’s dead? He might have escaped.”

Draco looked back at her and gave a slow nod. “It’s confirmed. They sent the bodies back with a message: ‘The blood of the Dark Lord’s servants will fuel the revolution.’ His corpse was drained. I personally confirmed that it was him.”

Draco gave a sharp sigh and started pulling off his Death Eater robes. “The rest of Eastern Europe is expected to follow suit within the next few days. It’s—” Draco snorted, “—it’s the collapse we orchestrated, we just hoped they’d wait until July. Severus claimed he had everything under control.” He sneered. “Fucking idiot.”

The last words were half-snarled.

Hermione swallowed and forced herself to breathe. Her stomach felt as though there were a weight in it so painful she wanted to double over and vomit. She was going to die. She and the baby and Draco were all going to die.

Severus had been the vital piece. He’d been her last hope. She’d thought that maybe he’d help her find a way to save Draco. She’d told him before she left for Sussex that she needed Draco to live. He had to know she wasn’t going to fly away quietly while Draco went off to commit suicide. She’d mentally rehearsed a speech begging him, *“ I told you, I need Draco. I’ll do anything. Anything it takes. Anything you want. Please help me. Please help me. If I lose him, I’ll die of a broken heart. I’ll do anything you ask if you help me save him.”*

She’d clung to the idea that Severus might have ideas that she and Draco hadn’t considered.

Without him, she suddenly felt the last tiny ray of hope gutter out. It was as though a black hole had opened under her feet, swallowing not only her desperate hope for Draco’s survival, but hers and their baby’s as well. Draco looked as though he were on the verge of a breakdown. He breathed in sharply through his teeth and dragged a hand through his hair before kicking his robes across the room.

Her hand twitched towards him. She felt as though she might faint.

She reached out and touched him lightly on the arm. He stared down at her, and he looked so tired.

“It's—it’s alright, Draco,” she said, meeting his eyes. Her voice threatened to waver, but she forced it to stay steady. “It’s alright,” she said again. *Don’t do anything else to yourself.*

Her chest spasmed, and her fingers gripped his sleeve. “You did everything you could. More than anyone should have ever asked.”

I’d rather die in your arms.

Draco looked at her for a moment before his eyes narrowed. “You’re still leaving.”

Hermione stared at him blankly.

He reached up, and his fingertips brushed her cheek. “I can still get you out. Severus was the safest option, but there are other options. I didn’t mean for you to think you wouldn’t escape now.”

Hermione was still gripping his sleeve. He rested his hand on hers. “It won’t be as clean. It’s longer, and it’ll be a more difficult journey for you to take,” his expression was worried, “especially pregnant. Ginny will come back to Britain and take you.”

Before Hermione could react, he called out “Topsy!”

Topsy instantly appeared in the room.

“Topsy, Severus is dead.” He said it matter-of-factly. The rage was gone. He was cold and intent, back on mission.

An option had been eliminated. He’d moved on to the next. Unhesitating. Unyielding. Driven to succeed.

Severus had been a mechanism for getting what he wanted.

“Granger will leave Europe via the route Kreacher and I established this spring. You and Kreacher will both leave tonight for Ginny’s safe house. When you arrive, you’ll take over care of James while Kreacher brings Ginny back. Everything you’ll need for the journey is in the safe house at Whitecroft. I’ll send word, so she’ll expect you.”

Topsy looked up at Draco and then folded her arms obstinately. “If Topsy is going, who is taking care of the Miss?” Draco considered for a moment. “Bobbin. Bobbin will take care of her while you’re with James.”

Topsy shook her head. “The Miss is not even knowing Bobbin, she is only knowing Topsy. Bobbin knows babies, Bobbin is not knowing one thing about pregnant witches. Topsy will stay.”

Draco gave a long suffering sigh as he stared down at Topsy, whose chin was only slightly higher than his knees. “Bobbin could care for James in the short-term, but if the escape doesn’t go as planned, you’ll be caring for him for the foreseeable future. Bobbin is not capable of that.”

Topsy began opening her mouth, but Draco raised an eyebrow pointedly and continued, “I’m aware it’s not ideal, but Ginny trusts you with James. I can’t have her baulk or delay because I sent a house-elf she doesn’t know.

“But—”

Draco’s expression grew icy. “Topsy, I didn't call you to consult with you. You will go care for James. That is an order. If all goes well, you’ll see Granger again within the month. Go on now.” Topsy stood for a moment as she stared up at Draco, then she blinked and her enormous eyes filled

with tears. “And when will Topsy be seeing Master Draco again?”

Draco stared down at her for a moment, and his throat dipped as he pressed his lips into a flat line. “Don’t do this, Topsy. This has always been the plan.”

Topsy shook her head and stomped a tiny foot.

“You is not even saying goodbye. You is just sending Topsy away.” An enormous tear slid down Topsy’s nose and splashed onto the floor. “Topsy was to stay to the end. You promised.”

Draco looked at her, his eyes flickering for a moment before they turned flint-like and his expression hardened. “It’s not an option now. Topsy, you have an order from your master.”

Topsy didn’t move. She kept staring up at Draco, and several more tears splashed onto the floor.

“Topsy, go now.” His voice was cold and firm, and Hermione felt the magic in the air.

Topsy’s eyes widened with horror, and she reached towards him. “No! Please. Master Draco —”

She vanished before she’d finished speaking.

Draco stared down at the empty space for a moment before turning away. He sighed and suddenly looked so exhausted Hermione thought he might just fall backwards. She was at a loss. Topsy’s expression of desperate horror felt branded into her eyes.

“You should have let her say goodbye,” she finally said.

Draco nodded dully. “I don’t know how to.”

He sighed and rolled his jaw. “You can tell her I’m sorry when you see her again.”

He seemed to regard the matter closed.

Hermione felt a growing sort of hysterical rage. “She helped raise you. If she thought she was going to be with you until the end, you should have at least given her a chance to say goodbye. You can’t—you can’t just use people like they’re tools for getting what you want and force them away if their emotions inconvenience you.”

Draco looked at her sharply, irritation visible in his silver eyes. “My entire life is comprised of emotional fallout.” He looked feral. “Sometimes—I don’t have the capacity to handle any more of it.”

Hermione pressed her lips together, but they twisted. “Is that what you’re going to do to me too—when it’s my turn to go?”

Draco’s eyes glinted. “No. Although it would be fitting. We were never much for goodbyes, as I recall.”

She looked down and fidgeted with her hands. “You should have let her say goodbye. A few more minutes wouldn’t have hurt. Now she’s going to feel—”

“I’m aware of how it feels to lose someone without saying goodbye, Granger!” His knuckles were white and his jaw clenched as he snarled the words. It was like being kicked in the stomach. She felt herself pale.

Draco's eyes burned as he glared at her with all his bitter rage. Then he blinked, and the emotions vanished behind his occlumency walls.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Just—tell her I'm sorry," he said in a clipped voice.

Hermione swallowed bitterly as she nodded. She looked down at her hands, trying to think of something else to talk about.

"I didn't know you were in contact with Ginny," she finally said.

Draco shrugged and appeared relieved by the change of subject. "Not much. I used to visit on occasion, mainly to ensure she hadn't tried to run off." He raised an eyebrow. "She tried to cut my throat with a steak knife when I told her the Order had lost." He gave Hermione a pointed look. "Shockingly enough, it was rather difficult to make her believe I was keeping her locked in a safe house for her protection." Hermione's eyes dropped away. She hadn't considered how fraught a situation it would have been for Draco to be the one informing Ginny that the war had been lost and her entire family killed. Or how he would have ever managed to convince her that he was trustworthy.

"Once the Dark Lord restricted me from leaving Britain without permission, we primarily used a scroll with a protean charm for occasional communication. Topsy was with her, helping her care for James until you were assigned to me. Ginny was aware that you'd finally been found, and that the plan was for you to join her. I sent her updates from time to time about your memory loss and what condition you were in, so she'd know what to expect. So… she's—aware that you've become pregnant."

Draco looked down and straightened the cufflinks on his shirt.

Hermione studied him for a moment. "What?"

Draco looked up from his sleeve, and his expression closed. "Well, she was informed of the context in which you were being sent here to the manor, unfortunately she—she assumed I had greater ability to subvert instructions and protect you than I did. She only realised that it wasn't the case when I sent word that you were pregnant." His jaw twitched minutely. "Suffice to say, the begrudging tolerance she'd developed up to that point has permanently gone now."

He cleared his throat. "I hadn't anticipated the Dark Lord knowing about you when I was trying to get you out of Europe. Aside from the safehouse in Denmark, most of the escape routes in place weren't feasible. I used Kreacher to establish a secondary portkey route that Ginny could use, but it wasn't completed until the end of April." He cocked his head to the side. "Muggle aeroplanes were an idea I had, but the Muggle Prime Minister has been collaborating closely with the Ministry. Polyjuicing you as a Muggle was an option, but not once you were pregnant, and there were variables I wouldn't have been able to control for in the Muggle world…"

He abruptly seemed to realise he was rambling and cut himself off. "So—portkeys were the best I could do."

Hermione stared up at him.

"I have to say, you've ended up being quite expensive, Granger." There was a reason why international portkey travel was restricted. Intercontinental portkey displacement could drop a

Wizard into outer-space if incorrectly calculated. There was elaborate and specialized expertise necessary for intercontinental portkey creation, to the extent that most were government sponsored and owned in order to be affordable.

Hermione knew because the Order had pursued the idea of obtaining a portkey to Australia or Canada in order to evacuate the children and refugees. Legally purchased, it would have used an eighth of Harry's vault. On the black market, the price would have easily been double or triple. "It won't be as untraceable as the route with Severus—" Draco was saying. He'd caught her hand in his, and one of his fingers slipped along her inner-wrist and twitched at the manacle locked there, "—you should use the extra time to regain more weight and build up your stamina."

She furrowed her eyebrows as she stared up at him. "How will you get the manacles off without Severus?"

Draco gave a dry laugh. "Removing them was never really an obstacle. The difficulty has always been getting you safely out of Europe immediately afterwards. There are plenty of Death Eaters who will do anything they're told once you find the right pressure point."

Hermione nodded stiffly. "How long—until Ginny comes?"

Draco furrowed his eyebrows and then quirked one up as he calculated. "The house-elves will have to apparate to the safe-house by a series of jumps since they can't use portkeys. It takes more than a week to apparate to the safe house. Kreacher will escort Ginny back and show her the route. It's a series of concealed portkeys rather than one. The margin for error is smaller when the distance is reduced. She'll probably arrive in three weeks, depending on how she handles portkey travel."

More time , whispered Hermione's desperate, greedy heart, but the instant it occurred to her, the guilt struck her.

Now that she was no longer primarily dreading him, the reality of Severus' death was slowly washing over her.

Severus, her mentor. Her colleague. One of the few people she had regarded as having truly known her. He'd been chained to the war even longer than Hermione and Draco. She'd often wondered what the reason was for his switch in allegiance.

Whatever it had been, the secret died with him.

Draco went and dropped into the chair.

"Did you—know Severus well?" she asked.

He looked up at her. His eyes were cool grey, but a thin smile played at the corner of his mouth. "No. He didn't like me."

Hermione looked down. "I'm sorry."

"When he wasn't giving me orders, he spent most of his time telling me that I didn't deserve to have someone like you care about me; that you were worth ten of me." He raised an eyebrow. "When it wasn't Severus saying it, it was Ginny; although she placed the number somewhat higher." Draco's availability abruptly ended with Severus' death. He was called away less than an hour later. Hermione didn't see him until he arrived briefly the next afternoon in order to introduce Hermione

to Topsy's replacement.

Bobbin was a younger elf. Hermione wasn't sure how old any of the elves were, but Topsy had easily been older than Kreacher, and Bobbin seemed to be about the age Dobby had been. As Hermione studied her, she realised she'd seen her before. Bobbin was the elf Astoria had sent when Hermione had first arrived at the manor.

Bobbin gave a low curtsy. "Bobbin will be doing her best."

"Tell Bobbin anything you want. She's aware of the restrictions you have." Draco's mind was clearly elsewhere. He walked away without a word.

Hermione didn't see Draco again for more than a day.

She forced herself to eat even though it made her stress nausea worse.

She started working out again.

A longer, harder journey. Multiple portkeys while pregnant.

The pregnancy guide had included a long section explaining the risks of displacement transport during pregnancy. Portkeys were preferable to apparition, but either form tended to make witches violently ill and could cause contractions or premature labour. A potion to settle the stomach and a dose of Calming Draught beforehand were strongly recommended if the use of a portkey was necessary.

Hermione had no idea how she'd handle portkeying. In a worst case scenario, repeatedly portkeying could send her into premature labour.

If she lost the baby in the process of escaping without Draco, she thought she would probably die.

It might make a difference if she were less physically fragile.

She started with basic lunges and crunches. She couldn't push herself off the floor to do a push-up, but she made herself begin doing regular repetitions of everything she could manage.

Three weeks. She had three weeks to come up with something better than Draco's new plan.

She just needed to get his Dark Mark off. If she could get it off, there would be numerous methods of escape available to them.

If they killed Voldemort, the Dark Mark would vanish. Potentially so would the only existing mechanism for removing the manacles. The manacles needed the Dark Marks to activate the release mechanism; without marked Death Eaters, everyone manacled might wait years before a way of overriding or recreating Voldemort's Dark Mark was invented.

It might save Draco though. However, Hermione had no idea how to go about it. Draco refused to discuss any ideas that endangered her or ran the risk of his cover being blown before her manacles were removed.

She didn't even know where Voldemort's castle was. If she could just get Draco's mark off.

The anniversary celebration came, and the manor sat silent. Hermione spent the day reading, gnawing her fingernails to the quick, and doing exercise repetitions when she felt so anxious she

thought she might start panicking. Draco had left the previous afternoon and not returned, that was all Bobbin knew.

Lucius had been back to the manor, apparently no worse off for having murdered Astoria.

Hermione knew because early in the morning she saw him standing in the path outside her window, staring up at the North Wing.

She'd ducked quickly out of sight.

The day of the anniversary passed without event for Hermione. Her room felt claustrophobic, as though she were going to suffocate while waiting there.

It was the middle of the night when Draco abruptly appeared in the room next to her door.

He stalked across the room and nearly collapsed on top of her as he wrapped his arms around her waist and dropped his forehead on her shoulder.

Hermione's spine bowed slightly as she held him up. The spent dark magic hanging off him was almost enough to make her gag.

"Are you alright? What's wrong? Has something happened?" she asked, her voice frantic as she ran her fingers over him trying to find an injury.

"Mmmfine." His voice was muffled in her robes. "I'm just tired."

He lifted his head and straightened as he stared down at her. "It was a long day."

"Sit down." She pulled him over to the bed, and he sat heavily on the edge of it. She studied him. He looked frayed. "What happened?"

He stared up at her, his expression was drained but there was a sort of cold triumph in his eyes. "The Dark Lord didn't take news regarding Romania well and over-exerted himself yesterday. He failed to appear at today's celebration." Draco tilted his head to the side, and the corner of his mouth twisted up into a smirk. "There's blood in the water. If anyone had doubts that he's weak—it's all but confirmed now. He's facing the end—even he knows it."

Hermione studied him. The light in her room was dim but he seemed ghastly pale, as though he'd been drained of colour. "But—?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Well—I'm his supposed successor. I had to fill both roles in his absence." The triumph in his expression faded into exhaustion. "It was a few more Killing Curses than I'd expected."

He suddenly looked young. A flicker of boyish vulnerability appeared for a moment. "I don't know—"

He cut himself off and was silent for several seconds.

"I'll be fine. I'm just tired," he finally said. Hermione tangled her fingers in his hair. "Oh, Draco."

She wondered sometimes if there would be an eventual point when the Heart of Isis would fail. Surely it couldn't function indefinitely. It was already absorbing all the dark magic that should have been seeping out of Draco's runes, that combined with everything else Draco regularly did—

Hermione banished the thought. He had a far more immediate fate to escape before she needed to worry about Dark Magic corrosion killing him.

She brushed her fingers against his cheek. His skin was icy cold. In the moonlight, with his pale hair, skin, and eyes, he almost seemed like a ghost she was clinging to.

She was magicless. She had no spells or healing to offer.

“Go to sleep. You should sleep,” she said. “You’ll feel better if you can rest.”

He gave a nod and slumped down.

She ran her fingers through his hair, twisting it around her fingers and watching it slip free. She traced along his knuckles, and then rubbed her hands against his, trying to impart some warmth from wherever it had leeched out of him. His hands spasmed from time to time when he moved his sleep.

He had such long fingers. In another life, he could have been a healer or a musician. He would have had the perfect hands for it.

Just another thing Voldemort ruined.

She sat beside him watching him sleep, feeling him grow slowly warmer.

He jerked abruptly awake, snatching his fingers away from hers and gripping his left forearm as he sat up. He pressed a kiss against her forehead and left without a word.

Hermione didn’t see him again for two days. She read the Daily Prophet’s recap of the anniversary celebration. Predictably Voldemort’s absence was barely mentioned and heavily excused. There was more time devoted to Astoria’s failure to appear.

Draco had killed seventy-five prisoners over the course of the day. Speeches and entertainment and then he was called up to kill traitors and resistance fighters. It had happened in three sets. Twenty-five prisoners all lined up for him to execute. Again. And Again.

It was an unbelievable quantity of killing curses.

The revolution in Romania was dismissed as a minor, local uprising, not related to Voldemort’s regime at all.

Hermione read the paper through twice and then went back to her books, back to her exercise repetitions. While she was forcing herself to do any unbearable quantity of crunches on the floor, she refined and perfected the theory of the potion until it was flawless.

In another life, if she could have become a researcher, inventing the theory would have been a distinguishing success. Like the twelve uses of dragon's blood, even if four were entirely theory-based, the deepened understanding of magical theory would have been notable in its own right. But Hermione didn’t care about a theoretical potion. She needed a real one with ingredients she could actually obtain.

She had no idea how to get hold of phoenix tears.

Fawkes had vanished after Dumbledore’s funeral at Hogwarts and never been seen again. Phoenix weren’t even native to Europe.

The only two known domesticated phoenix in the last century were Fawkes and Sparky, the mascot of the New Zealand Quidditch team. Domestication had been more common a few hundred years before, but whatever the art of reliably earning a phoenix's loyalty was, it had been lost to history.

She lay in the middle of the floor, panting and thinking while she caught her breath. Her abdominals and legs were burning.

If Draco tried to run with her, they'd be hunted down. Voldemort could find him through the Dark Mark. They'd be hunted from refuge to refuge, and the travel would be more and more difficult for her as the pregnancy progressed. Assuming she didn't eventually miscarry from the stress of living on the run, there would later be a baby they were trying to flee with.

There was no place to run to. There would be few Wizarding countries powerful enough to deter Voldemort's pursuit that wouldn't immediately arrest Draco themselves. Draco might be collared, but he was one of the most dangerous Dark Wizards in history, and that fact had heavily emphasized in recent months.

It was as Lucius had said. Draco was Voldemort's hunting dog. He could utilise Draco better if he weren't so afraid of Draco usurping him.

"Why can't you travel alone now? Why are you restricted but not anyone else?" she'd asked Draco during one of the days before Severus had been killed. He'd sighed and glanced away. "The Dark Lord began receiving reports that I was privately visiting the homes of Death Eaters and powerful allies. He assumed I was attempting to garner support in order to depose him. Leaving Britain again without express permission will be open treason, without exception."

"I travelled all over Europe. Death Eaters and allies with certain—reputations…"

Her throat had tightened. "It was because you were looking for me."

He'd just nodded.

Their attempts to hold onto each other had carved their hope for escape into a shard so narrow she sometimes wondered if she was imagining its existence.

No. She could save him, she was certain there was some way to do it, she just needed to figure out what it was. She'd never been a very good chess player. Even when she'd had occlumency, she'd never been able to stay detached about using people. That was where she and Draco diverged.

If she wanted to save Draco, she needed to be more ruthless. As ruthless as he was.

She sank back into thought, pacing in slow circles and geometric patterns around her room, until she felt an almost indescribable sensation occur in her lower abdomen. In some ways, it was not an actual sensation but a feeling that something had occurred. Fluttering.

She froze and stared down at her stomach. There was the beginning of a small swell between the jut of her hip bones.

She almost forgot sometimes that she was pregnant. The fact felt too overwhelming to process in light of all the more immediate concerns she had. When focused on the immediate future, a pregnancy felt more like a medical diagnosis that she had to account for than a baby.

She had never planned to have children. When she'd been in school, motherhood had been an eventual goal so far removed from the present she'd barely contemplated it. Children, someday; after she'd graduated, and had a job, and found someone she'd consider a partner.

Then the war came, and having children then had felt almost criminal to Hermione.

Ginny had seen James as a promise and a beacon of hope, but to Hermione a child in a war was someone vulnerable; someone entirely helpless to protect themselves from the incalculable pain that existed. Selfish. Not worth the danger.

Get married. Have children.

She'd stopped expecting to ever have those things years ago when she'd kept secretively using more and more dark magic. She'd coldly smothered the idea when she gave her word to be a Death Eater's willing war prize. It was little more than fantasy by the time she'd become complicit in war crimes and eventually volunteered to coordinate and manage them. She had meant it when she told Draco about the world she wanted but never expected to have a part in.

She didn't have any idea how to be a mother. None of the decisions she'd made in her life had entertained the idea of children. She wasn't sure if wanting to have a child wasn't just her desperate selfishness rearing its head.

"Poor little healer with no one to take care of. No one who needs you or wants you. You can't bear being alone. You don't know how to function. You need someone to love; you'll do anything for the people that let you love them."

Her jaw trembled as she looked down.

Maybe Draco had been right. Maybe that was what she was like. She'd always obstinately attached herself to those she'd thought might need her. Maybe she just wanted to keep the baby so she wouldn't be alone.

She pressed her fingers against her abdomen and stood unmoving for several seconds until she felt another flutter, quick as a heartbeat and then gone again.

"I'll take care of you," she whispered. "I'll do everything I can to be a good mum. There's a potion I can make when you're older. Then—then I'll be able to go outside with you sometimes. You won't be trapped with me. When you grow up and want to go, I'll let you go, I promise."

The doorknob abruptly rattled and then went still. Hermione started violently with surprise and then stood, pressing her hands against her chest as her heart pounded, staring at the door.

Nothing else happened. She waited and waited, but her world had fallen silent again.

She crossed the room on her toes and rested her ear against the door.

Silent.

She couldn't hear even the faintest sound through the door, but she knew Draco had warded it.

Someone could be shouting on the other side, and she wouldn't know. The door didn't move again as she rested her hands against the wood and strained to hear.

It could be Lucius.

It was possible he was unwilling to wait six months for Draco to remarry and hoped by killing off the ‘Mudblood whore,’ he might accelerate the process.

Hermione stepped nervously away from the door but then hesitated. The way the door had shaken, it was almost as though someone had fallen against it. She bit her lip and stepped back, pressing her ear more closely to the crack between the door and the frame.

She shouldn’t.

She shouldn’t.

Draco would tell her not to.

Her hand wrapped slowly around the knob, and she turned it as silently as she could, cracking the door open. She peered out, and her heart stopped.

Draco was lying face down on the floor. She flung the door open, rapidly glanced up and down the hall, and knelt down, dragging him into her room. She kicked the door shut as she rolled him onto his back and pressed her fingers against his pulse.

He was unconscious.

He was freezing cold. He was going into shock. His robes were shiny and smelled of rot. There were darkened silvery smears on his face. He was still breathing. She checked his eyes and found the pupils unevenly dilated.

She ran her hands over his shoulders and touched his face gently. “Draco? Draco…what happened to you?”

She started muttering curses under her breath. She was burning to have her magic back. The manacles around her wrists grew hot as she seethed over her impotence, kneeling over him, trying to guess what had been done. She ran her fingers along his arms and hands and felt the rigid knots and tearing caused by cruciatus. She could feel his heart racing in his chest.

“Bobbin!” she called sharply.

The elf popped into the room and gave a squeak of horror when her eyes landed on Draco.

“Who’s Draco’s healer?” Hermione asked. The elf stared blankly at Hermione. “Who does he call when he comes back hurt?”

Bobbin looked down at her hands. “Bobbin is not knowing. Bobbin is mostly being in the kitchens and cleaning. The Master is not calling Bobbin when he is being hurt. Only Topsy or Kreacher.”

Hermione looked down in frustration and drew a deep breath before looking back up. “Do you know where he keeps his medical supplies? Healing potions and things like that?”

Bobbin brightened and nodded eagerly.

“Good,” Hermione said in a tight voice. “Bring me pain relief potions then. Every variety you have. And any other medical supplies you have access to. Bring them all here so I know what I have to work with.” Bobbin vanished with a loud pop, and Draco twitched.

Hermione looked down at him.

He was dazedly staring up towards her, his eyes were unfocused, without any signs of recognition.

“Draco?”

He blinked. “Granger?”

He looked entirely bewildered.

“Draco—” she touched him gently on the cheek and held her voice steady. Calming. “What did he do to you? How long were you crucio’d?”

He furrowed his eyebrows and squinted. “Where are we?”

He kept blinking as though he were trying to see in the dark.

Hermione’s throat tightened. “We’re—we’re in my room. I think you must have apparated and passed out just outside my door.”

His expression twisted. His pupils were blown wide. He shook his head, and a low groan escaped him. “I didn’t mean to come here.”

Hermione’s eyes started burning, and she brushed his forehead lightly with her fingertips.

“I know—” Her throat caught slightly.

Draco twitched at the sound, and his eyebrows knitted together. “Are you alright? I can’t— Are you breathing?”

He reached up blindly in the direction of her voice, and his hand grazed her cheek.

Hermione caught his hand in hers and pressed her face into his palm, kissing it. “I’m fine. I’m a healer, remember? It’s not the first time you’ve collapsed into my arms.”

She cleared her throat and forced herself to speak firmly. “Now, I need you to answer my questions. Draco, what did he do? Tell me, what did he do to you?”

Draco was silent for a moment and then sighed. “He says I’m at fault me for the spreading insurgency—if I were more competent, I’d be containing it. He decided I was due to offer proof of loyalty. A few hours of legilimency, then—it occurred to him that I’m an occlumens.” He snorted. “He had—someone crucio me while he checked again.”

He swallowed. “Fortunately he was tired by then. It didn’t last so long the second time.” A twisted smile ghosted across his lips. “As a reward for proving my continued loyalty, I’ve been given the rest of the week off, so—at least there’s that.” His attempt to sound reassuring and sarcastic made it worse.

Hermione’s hands began shaking as she fought off a sense of hysteria. Just breathe. Just breathe. You can’t panic right now, he’ll hurt himself more if he thinks you’re going to have a seizure.

Draco squinted and turned his head, as though he were trying to glance around her room. “It’s not night yet, is it? I don’t think I can see.” He pressed the back of his hand against his eyes. “That’s new.”

Hermione started going through Draco's robes, burning her fingertips as she kept pulling out weapons concealed in the dozens pockets lining his robes. Finally her hand closed around a familiar leather case, and she pulled it out.

She flipped open the healing kit and jerked out the vial of Calming Draught. She bit the cork out with her teeth, tilting Draco's head up onto her lap as she held the vial to his lips.

"Draught of Peace. It will slow your heart rate and ease the way your muscles are spasming."

She waited, running her fingers through his hair and talking to him so he'd stay calm and lucid. She felt the potion take effect as his body relaxed onto her lap.

She picked up his right arm and pulled his wand out, slipping its handle into his left hand, and holding it in place so that his spasming fingers wouldn't drop it.

"Draco," she kept her voice carefully steady. "I need you to cast a diagnostic for me. Can you try? I'll help with the wand motion, but it has to be your magic."

It was a diagnostic targeted at his brain and nervous system, and it took six tries before the spell would hold.

She studied it quietly for several minutes. "The legilimency strained your optic nerves, that's why your eyes aren't working. It's not permanent. You just need to rest so it can heal. Your— your nerve damage from the torture is—" her jaw trembled, and she swallowed. "He really shouldn't keep torturing you."

Draco snorted and started to reply, but his entire body spasmed. He didn't make a sound but pressed his lips together so tightly they turned white.

There was a pop and Bobbin appeared, surrounded by potions and medical supplies.

Hermione looked up at the elf. "Can you levitate him onto the bed for me? He's too heavy for me to lift. And take his clothes off, his robes are filthy."

"Bobbin can." The elf snapped her fingers and floated Draco carefully over towards the bed.

Hermione went over and started sorting through all the supplies. They were all labeled, many of them in a sharp, spiky script she knew had been Severus'. She selected four potions and went back to Draco. Bobbin had removed his clothes, cleaned Draco's face, and tucked him into the bed.

Hermione leaned over him, studying his eyes and taking note of all the physical symptoms she could detect. He was ghastly pale, and his chest kept hitching as he tried to breathe in a way that wasn't painful. She rested a hand against his forehead.

"You should have had a pain relief potion with you," she said after a moment. "You were the one who told me not to apparate after legilimency without taking a pain relief potion first. You always had one for me."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

She looked down and unstoppered one of the vials she'd brought over, pressing it into his hand. He downed it with a grimace.

She handed him the next potion. “I should have included one in your healing kit. I ran out of space. I should have put in a pain potion instead of Murtlap Essence.”

Draco blinked and she could tell he was trying to force his eyes to focus on her as she handed him the third potion.

She picked up his empty hand and pressed it against her cheek. “You already know what I look like, rest your eyes. Your head will hurt less if you keep them closed.”

He obstinately narrowed them, trying to make out her face for a moment longer before obeying.

She watched as some of the lines of tension around his eyes and mouth slowly faded and his breathing gradually evened.

When she was sure the potions had taken effect, she moved on. “Who’s your healer? Who treats you after he tortures you? You need to call them. You’re not going to be able to move for weeks without treatment.”

Draco’s face remained neutral, but his fingers twitched. Hermione felt her chest tighten after he failed to answer for several seconds.

“Draco—”

“I deal with it myself unless it’s life-threatening,” he finally said, the words were so low they were almost under his breath. He didn’t open his eyes. “Severus used to help occasionally— when it was something I didn’t know how to heal—but otherwise—it’s my job.”

Hermione stared at him in horror. Draco cracked an eye open and squinted at her before snorting.

He raised one eyebrow and closed his eyes again, his expression tightening. “You may recall you once put a rather rare stone into my heart. It may not show in diagnostics, but I have to avoid healers as much as I can. If the Dark Lord began receiving repeated reports that I’m physically pristine despite having had Dark Runes carved into my back for three years, he’d have more than a few questions. I’d probably end up with my heart cut out. When it’s something life-threatening, I call a healer and obliviate them afterwards, but half the healers in England would be addled at this point if I called and obliviated one every time I was crucio’d.”

Hermione felt as though he’d gutted her. “I didn’t—I didn’t realise.”

“It’s fine, Granger.” He didn’t open his eyes but still waved her off with his free hand. The corner of his mouth quirked up. “I’ve been told several times now that I have a natural talent for healing.” Her jaw kept trembling, and she ground her teeth together for a moment before she slipped his wand into his fingers. “Can—can you do the spell for me then?”

He muttered the spells while she guided his fingers, tapping across the pressure points of his right hand and up his forearm. His fingers spasmed repeatedly as she helped him send the mild vibrations into the drawn muscles, easing the tension.

His fingers finally fell open after several minutes, and she lay his wand aside. She picked up his right hand and began trying to fix all the damage. Her fingers began cramping, and she ignored it and kept working until his hand stopped twitching and would lay still.

She picked up the last potion she'd brought over and poured a small amount of the embrocation onto her palm. Starting at the ball of his thumb, she began rubbing it in gently, working down to his wrist and forearm and then up to his shoulders. The potion was warm and made her skin tingle as she massaged it into his skin, trying to repair all the rigid knots and torn muscles.

When she looked up after finishing both arms, Draco was asleep, his eyebrows tightly furrowed.

She studied him for several seconds before reaching out and brushing her fingertip lightly between his eyes, trying to banish the tension.

Without Draco to cast the spells, trying to massage away the knots and tremors took longer. She continued anyway.

Without him awake, she could safely cry while she worked.

He slept for nearly forty-eight hours. Hermione stayed with him almost the entire time. His expression relaxed when she was in bed beside him, talking to him quietly about anything that came to mind, running her fingers through his hair and working on his muscle damage. She nearly depleted his entire supply of embrocation potions.

When she became too restless to sit beside him, she would quietly pace. She looked out the window the next morning and spotted Lucius walking the length of the North Wing as though he were trying to measure it in paces. He looked up, and their eyes met. Hermione's blood ran cold. She met his gaze for only a moment before shrinking back from sight.

Everytime Draco woke, Hermione checked his eyes and had him perform basic healing spells for her. He kept dozing until Bobbin came to report that Lucius was at Draco's door and threatening to break it down if he didn't see Draco.

Draco forced himself up. "How long have I been here? I was only given three days off. Bobbin, bring me a full set of robes."

Hermione tried to hold him back. "Draco, wait. Your eyes still haven't recovered. You still have half a day. You need to rest for as long as possible."

He rolled his eyes and stood up stiffly as Bobbin popped back in with a pile of robes. "That's what I keep pain relief for."

He dressed and made his way over to all the potions Bobbin had brought. He squinted as he held them a few inches from his face, trying to read the labels. He knocked back five of them in quick succession, ignoring Hermione's objections that certain types of pain relief shouldn't be combined. He rolled his eyes. "I'm well-versed in pain relief. I can almost guarantee it won't be the thing that kills me."

He blinked repeatedly and shook his head.

Hermione could tell he still couldn't see reliably. "Be careful, Draco."

He smiled briefly as he met her eyes. "I'll be fine."

She still caught the tensed, braced expression on his face the split second before he apparated.

Bobbin came a few hours later and took away all the medical supplies. Master Draco was fine, she

said while avoiding Hermione’s eyes, he just wanted to inventory which potions Hermione had used.

Hermione was left alone to occupy herself in her cage, worrying and wondering what was happening beyond her bedroom door.

Chapter 8

July 2005

Bobbin brought porridge for breakfast the next morning. Hermione didn't feel like eating and ignored the tray while she paced around her room.

Draco hadn't come back since he'd left to see his father. She was sick of waiting. She wasn't going to just sit impotently in her bedroom and wait for Ginny to come and Draco to die.

She strode over to the door and pulled it open with a jerk.

"Don't!" A sharp voice screamed.

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin and turned to find Narcissa had leapt out of her chair and appeared on the verge of attempting to climb out of her frame.

Hermione stared wide-eyed across the room at Narcissa, her hand against her chest. Her heart felt as though it had jumped into her mouth.

Narcissa stared back at her.

"You can't go out. Draco isn't on the estate." Her voice was sharp and imperious.

Hermione had somehow thought she'd sound more broken. She drew a deep breath and looked at Narcissa warily. "You can tell?"

Narcissa gave short nod. "The magic of the estate knows."

Hermione closed the door slowly and walked over to the portrait. She studied Narcissa, taking note of the traits that Draco had inherited. The same mouth. The same mannerisms. In school, she'd thought Draco took entirely after his father, but now she saw how Narcissa subtly shone through Draco's Malfoy traits and features.

"I want to save your son," Hermione said.

Narcissa's mouth pursed tightly, and she raised an eyebrow. "You can't. If you really thought you could, you wouldn't be stalking around the room like a caged nundu."

Hermione didn't blink. "Draco will die if I don't do something."

Narcissa's expression fractured briefly then it smoothed and she glanced away. "There are worse things than dying." She straightened the cuff of her sleeve. "You don't know what my son was like when you went missing. You don't have any idea."

It was strange to see a teenage girl refer to a man a nearly decade older than herself as her son. "I saved him."

"You wouldn't have needed to if you'd just left sooner the way he'd begged you to. There were other people that mattered more to you than doing what he asked," Narcissa said, her voice cold.

She was so young, Hermione realised. Portraits didn't evolve or mature, they stayed the way they

were. The fact that Narcissa's portrait showed signs of any trauma showed just how very deep it had been. Fundamentally, she was still Narcissa Black, sixteen years old and full of romantic haughtiness.

"Why didn't Narcissa run when Draco asked her to? Because of Lucius?"

Narcissa's portrait stiffened. "No. Lucius is… he—he…" her mask fell apart. "He loved me —her—more than anything. She wanted to go—after the triwizard tournament—but Lucius swore Draco wouldn't have to take the mark. When he was arrested, she was certain the Dark Lord would come for Draco. She was going to take him as he was home from school. But… the Dark Lord came here first. Then… then—then afterwards—"

"She stayed to keep him alive," Hermione said. "Draco wouldn't have kept trying once he knew she was safe. He would have been dead in a matter of weeks."

Narcissa looked away but gave a short nod of acknowledgement.

Hermione stepped closer. "I want to save Draco. If you told Lucius—if he knew—"

"That is *out* of the question," Narcissa said in a razor-sharp voice.

Hermione stared in surprise at Narcissa's flashing, enraged eyes. It slowly dawned on her that Narcissa's portrait loved Lucius far more than she loved Draco.

The Narcissa in the portrait wasn't a mother. She was a teenage witch engaged to a wizard who adored her. She might call Draco her son and watch over Hermione, but fundamentally she would always choose Lucius first. She would let Draco die if it protected Lucius from the knowledge of what had happened.

Hermione's shoulders dropped. "Narcissa…"

"She didn't want him to ever know. You don't know what she put herself through to ensure he didn't find out. You thought that potion's withdrawal was difficult after three doses? She took it more than a dozen times—just in order to see him." Narcissa's voice was shaking with angry intensity. "Draco used to beg her not to."

Hermione pressed closer. Her fingers hovering a breath away from the painted canvas. "If she would have left him to protect Draco, she would have told him to try to save Draco."

Narcissa's expression was ice cold as she sat in her chair. "How would Lucius knowing change anything?"

Hermione looked down. "I don't know. I just think that he—" "If you interfere and things go wrong, everything Draco put himself through to protect you will be for nothing. There are worse things than dying. Anyone in this family can tell you that."

She refused to speak to Hermione further.

Hermione reluctantly turned away and went over to her breakfast tray. The warming spell had worn off, and the porridge was cold and unappetizing.

Hermione considered skipping breakfast, but she needed to regain her weight. She wasn't going to build muscle if she skipped meals. She sighed and half-heartedly picked up the small pitcher of

cream and poured it into the bowl, reaching for the spoon.

As her fingers touched the spoon handle, she felt a sharp jerk behind her navel.

It was like being inverted and shoved through a tube. The bedroom vanished, and she reappeared in midair, falling forward and smacking her head on the floor as her stomach roiled.

She almost vomited, as she gripped her tightly contracted abdomen protectively under one hand and tried to find her bearings. She gave several ragged gasps as she breathed. Everything was swimming and her forehead ached where she'd struck it.

She forced herself shakily up.

Lucius was sitting several feet away, reclined in a spindly chair, teacup in hand.

"Ah. There you are."

Hermione stared at him in blank horror as she took in the remainder of her surroundings. Lucius had portkeyed her across the manor into the drawing room in the South Wing.

He set his teacup down on its saucer and sat forward, eyeing her.

"I have some questions for you, Mudblood."

She shifted back, and her hand stuck slightly to the floor. She pulled it free and then she realised the ground was sticky.

The ground was soaked with drying blood.

The spoon which had brought her lay on the ground a few feet away. Her heart stalled. Her hand darted out, and she tried to grab it.

It vanished just before her fingers reached it.

"Trying to leave so soon? After all the effort of bringing you here? You offend me, Mudblood," Lucius drawled, twirling his wand in his hand. She stared up at him, forcing herself to breathe steadily. She just needed to stay calm and buy time until Draco came.

Draco, your father has me. South Wing. She focused her mind on the thought.

"Did you know," Lucius pulled his cuffs away from his hands, "you are intriguingly difficult to access? I must congratulate my son for his ingenuity. Since my return, the North Wing of the manor has become bewildering. I enter the hallways and find myself walking in circles and forgetting which doors lead where. Before I recover my bearings, I've walked back into the main wing or recalled something I'd meant to do but forgotten. Or Draco appears requesting my help with a matter."

Hermione licked her lips nervously and didn't answer.

"Have you noticed the phenomenon?" Lucius asked, his voice lilting. He was toying with the handle of his wand.

"I don't leave my room—by myself," she said, avoiding his eyes. There was an aching sensation at the base of her spine and sharp pain in her lower abdomen. Her throat tightened and her shoulders

almost spasmed as she sat rigidly, trying to ignore it.

“No. It doesn’t seem that you do.” Lucius’ lip curled. “Then I’m sure you must be unaware that my son was—“ Lucius blinked. “He was injured a few days ago.”

Hermione didn’t so much as breathe.

Lucius cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been looking into you recently. The little healer who was caught blowing up Sussex.”

Hermione cringed and felt herself shrivel internally as Lucius continued, “I was at Sussex after it was destroyed. I saw the bodies removed from the rubble. The poison used to ensure that anyone who escaped the blast radius died was a fascinating invention. Ingested, it kills painlessly within seconds, but inhaled is slower… and messier.”

Hermione gulped.

Lucius noticed her reaction and cocked his head to the side. “What kind of healer can build a bomb capable of killing nearly a thousand people in a matter of minutes?”

He leaned forward in his chair, dragging his eyes over her so slowly she could almost feel his gaze on her skin. “Am I intended to believe a little Mudblood healer, so insignificant there are barely records with her name included, was single-handedly responsible for one of the most devastating attacks the Dark Lord sustained?”

Hermione said nothing, forcing her expression to stay neutral as she processed the revelation. There were hundreds, possibly thousands of Order records with her name on them. From the cave at the beach. In Grimmauld Place. She’d managed the reconnaissance team and Order prison following Kingsley’s death. The Order’s classified records had reflected that.

Unless they were gone somehow. Lucius sat back, snorting and startling her from her reverie. “It wasn’t you. You were a decoy. A sacrificial pawn to protect the last Order member.”

She blinked.

She’d assumed that healing Draco had been what piqued Lucius’ suspicion. Instead he’d brought her in over a misguided conspiracy theory. She stared at him, trying to calculate her course of action.

Lucius’ eyes narrowed as he stared at her. “You know the identity of the last Order member, the one responsible for blowing up Sussex and for killing the Warden in February.” He leaned towards her again, his silver eyes glittering.

Hermione averted her gaze. “I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything about a last Order member.”

“Ah yes…” Lucius made an unnerving tsking sound. “Those memories you lost that make you so important now.”

Hermione glanced surreptitiously towards the door.

“My son is resigned to wait until your memories can be safely extracted. He doesn’t want anything to happen to his little Mudblood unless the mind-healers approve it.” Lucius sighed and sank back into his chair, his lip curling. “He’s young and naive. He succeeded during one war and now thinks

being careful and following orders is a dependable path to success. I served during both wars. Victory can be snatched away at any point. Triumph burns to ash in an instant. One error or miscalculation and everything can slip away…" his voice trailed away, and he sat twirling his wand absent-mindedly in his fingers.

There was a long silence.

Hermione began estimating how quickly she could reach the door if she needed to bolt.

"Are you expecting someone?" Lucius' rolling purr was suddenly close. When she looked back, he'd moved from his seat and stood merely inches from her. His gaze was mocking. "My son, perhaps?"

He knelt down in front of her. "Do you expect Draco to appear and save you?" He smirked and glanced around them. "This room is unique. There's such an unusual quantity of magic centred here it affected the ley lines of the estate. It cannot be apparated into, and given inconvenient task of accessing you, I thought I'd return the favour to my son."

His hand rose up, and he caught her chin lightly with his fingertips. "I should hate to see him punished by having to damage you."

Hermione's throat closed, and she flinched as he leaned closer.

His hold tightened. "You wouldn't want that, would you? You are fond of him, I believe. He takes you for walks on our estate and you wait for him like an obedient little pet. He may enjoy you less if I'm required to cut the information out of you. You were a healer; do know how many nerve endings are in each of your fingertips? Tell me who the last remaining member of the Order is now, and I will not harm you."

"I don't know." Hermione tried to pull her face free, but Lucius dug his fingers under her jaw, gripping the bone painfully. "I don't know. I—don't remember yet."

He pulled her closer until their faces were nearly touching. His eyes were glittering, and he sneered viciously as though he were baring his teeth at her. "I don't believe you."

Hermione started shaking uncontrollably.

"I'm no fool. There was a spy among the Death Eaters in the year leading up to the Resistance's defeat. Even the Dark Lord suspected that one of his most trusted servants had betrayed him. They are the piece that remains unaccounted for. The fingerprints are scattered across the war. The unusually accurate attacks on our prisons. The massacres and acts of sabotage that were so uncharacteristic of the Order of the Phoenix. That person destroyed Sussex and disappeared after the Final Battle only to re-emerge a few months after you did." He'd tilted her head so sharply back it was difficult to breathe. "Your compliance may have lulled my son into a false sense of assurance, but you have not fooled me. You're not broken —you're lying in wait."

He shoved her backwards, and her head cracked against the stone floor as he pinned her to the ground under him.

"This is your last opportunity, Mudblood. If you wish to leave this room intact, tell me who the spy is." Lucius' face was centimeters from her own, and she could feel the heat of his breath across her face and smell the tannic scent of tea.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.” Her voice was trembling as she tried to avert her eyes. Her heart rate was spiking with steady terror. Don’t panic. Don’t panic. Breathe. “Malfoy tried to get the memories out. So did the Dark Lord. I don’t know who it is.”

She bit her lip and tried not to have a panic attack as Lucius knelt over her.

His hand trailed down her body, and she couldn’t suppress the shudder of revulsion when it came to a stop over of the growing swell in her lower abdomen. His fingers moved across it as though he were caressing her. “Isn’t this pregnancy of yours supposed to change that? That is why you’re here as my son’s plaything. I heard about your coma. Surely you remember something by now.”

“I don’t—I don’t.”

He gripped her by her throat. “I don’t believe you, Mudblood. Why don’t we see.” He wrenched her jaw straight and stared into her eyes.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Don’t! Please don’t—please don’t. Invasive magic— miscarriage—” she tripped over the words. Lucius laughed as his hold on her throat tightened. “Do you expect me to care about a Mudblood whore’s illegitimate daughter? Did you think my son intended to keep it?”

Hermione shook her head violently, trying to pull his hand away. “The Dark Lord—invasive magic could damage the memories—kill you. Draco killed Montague for it—Only—”

Lucius smirked down at her. “You seem suspiciously concerned for my longevity.”

He gripped her jaw and forced her face up towards his.

“Open your eyes, Mudblood, or I will cut your eyelids off.”

Hermione’s heart was beating so rapidly it had become a painful stabbing sensation in her chest.

You will be obedient.

She felt herself going slack as her eyes fluttered open.

You will not hurt anyone.

Her fingernails digging into Lucius’ wrist slipped loose. Lucius smirked as his grey eyes met hers.

You will do everything to produce healthy children.

She froze.

Everything.

Everything to produce healthy children.

She would do everything. She could do everything.

She focused on the thought and slammed her forehead into Lucius’ face. She felt his nose break as she wrenched herself away, kicking him savagely as she tore herself free and flung herself towards the door. Bony fingers clamped around her ankle and jerked her back, knocking her to the ground and dragging her back across the floor. She tried to kick herself free as Lucius dragged her under his body. She rammed her elbow into his solar plexus as she attempted to twist out of his hold.

She clawed at his face, aiming for his eyes. His grip loosened as he jerked back to avoid her fingernails. She scrambled away and rammed her heel into his throat before she flung herself towards the door again. Get to the door. Get to the door.

She slammed into the heavy wood and gripped the handle. She tried to turn it, but it wouldn't budge. A searing pain spread through her hand and up her arm as she kept trying to make it turn. Finally she gave an agonized scream and jerked her hand away. She stared down at her fingers and found the flesh burned and scorched to the bones. The knob was white hot.

Lucius laughed. The same unnerving, unending laugh he'd had as he watched Ron die.

The vibrations of it moved through her veins like ice. She turned slowly to find him standing across the room, grinning as blood trickled down his face, filling his mouth and filtering around his teeth.

He lifted a pale hand up to his throat and coughed. "I enjoyed that. Did you think you were going to escape, little mouse?" He gave a low chuckle. "You will die in this house. Like many Order members before you. There is no one left to save you."

Hermione stood staring at him. The burns on her hand were throbbing painfully with every beat of her racing heart.

As she stood by the door, a slow sinking sensation swept over her.

Draco wouldn't come in time.

He wouldn't. They'd used up all their luck surviving as long as they had.

Lucius wasn't Astoria. Kidnapping Hermione from her room had been premeditated and planned specifically to thwart Draco.

She stood studying Lucius until he flicked wand towards her. Hermione felt his magic seize hold of her and drag her forward. When she reached him, he sidestepped and she slammed into the bars of the cage in the centre of the room.

A bar caught her in the forehead, and her vision wavered from the impact. She slumped and shook her head, trying to clear it as she struggled to think.

She felt a flutter in her abdomen, and her throat thickened as her shoulders shook. She pressed her injured hand protectively over her stomach. "Please, Lucius—you don't want to do this."

His fingers dug into her shoulder as he turned her to face him. His face was covered in blood, and there were gouges down his forehead where she'd nearly clawed his eyes out.

Could she run again? Was there any point in trying?

Her legs abruptly gave out, and she slid down the bars to the floor.

"Don't do this, Lucius," she said. "You don't want to know."

Lucius knelt and tilted her head back. She stared into his cold silver eyes. They were just like Draco's. She'd never noticed that before. Lucius raised an eyebrow. "I have been commanded to find the last Order member, and I will. This is not a task I am permitted to fail."

Hermione stared at Lucius dazedly, there were spots riddling her vision and a detail that felt just out

of reach. A key. She studied his face, looking for Draco in it. Their eyes were so similar; they had the same desperation in them.

Lucius looked desperate.

Her eyes widened.

Voldemort aspired to immortality. He had no intention of having a successor. He only cared about power so long as he controlled it.

He'd burn the Wizarding world to the ground rather than let anyone else rule.

"He's going to kill Draco if you fail, isn't he?" She felt his fingers flinch almost imperceptibly. "The injury last week—it wasn't a test, it was your punishment. Are you the one who had to crucio him?"

Lucius' eyes flickered before turning colder.

When Hermione saw it, she tilted her head back gave a choking laugh. Of course, she should have known they'd have the same tells.

She held his gaze and leaned forward.

"I am the last Order member. The very last one," she said after a moment. "Everyone else is gone now. I'm all that's left."

His eyes narrowed.

"I did blow up Sussex." She kept looking into his cold eyes. "Harry—Harry was dead. Everyone was dead or captured, there was no one to stop me. I created the alchemy and designed both of the Order's bombs. The poison you found so interesting, I invented it too. Thestral blood. Monkshood. Asp venom. Arsenic. Pufferfish. Water hemlock roots. Newt skin. It was mine."

She drew a deep breath. "You're right though—there was a spy among the Death Eaters during the last year of the war. I was his handler."

There was a flash of triumph in Lucius eyes. Hermione wanted to spit at him.

"But you won't save Draco by finding him." She studied his bloodied face and heard his laughter as Ron died screaming. She leaned closer, her voice dropping into a whisper. "The spy who killed Umbridge and destroyed the locket is your son."

Lucius' expression went blank for a moment before twisting into an enraged sneer. He seized her by the throat, jerked her forward, and slammed her back into the bars of the cage. "My son would never ally himself with the Order."

Hermione choked but didn't break her eye contact with him.

"He—hates Voldemort," she rasped out. "He—has always—hated him. Why do you think there's a cage in your drawing room? Voldemort kept your wife in it." Lucius jerked as though she'd struck him. "You're lying!"

His grip on her throat tightened, and Hermione gasped as she fought to breathe. His fingers were pressed brutally into the esophagus, and the skin on her face grew taut from the pressure.

“Voldemort—tortured her—in this room. That’s why Draco took the mark and killed—Dumbledore…” she could barely force the words out. She clawed at his hand, trying to tear herself free. Her lungs began spasming and burning.

“Do you expect me to believe you?” He released her throat, and she gasped desperately for air, dragging it into her burning lungs as she collapsed against the cage.

His wand jabbed dangerously close to her face, and he snarled . *“Legilimens!”*

Lucius was not a legilimens. His magic for mind invasion was weak. It was like having her mind roughly pried apart with a blunt stick. If she’d had magic, he would never have been able to penetrate her mind.

She didn’t have magic.

He forced his way in.

There was no precision. He simply crushed her consciousness under his as he shoved his way in.

He didn’t focus on individual memories, just pushed his way through them until he collided with one.

Draco …

His fingers running along her spine as he kissed across her shoulders and neck. His other hand tangled in her hair, holding her close so that his bare skin pressed searingly against hers.

“I love you.” “I love you.” “I’m going to take care of you.” He muttered the words against her skin.

Hermione tried to tear the memory away but couldn’t summon any magic. She could feel her manacles starting to burn around her wrists.

Draco pressed her back against the headboard, wrapping her legs around his waist as he pushed into her. The devastating adoration in his face unmistakable as he kissed her. She tangled her fingers into his hair and kissed him back as her hips met his.

She could feel Lucius’ horrified rage.

She didn’t know how to show him the correct memories. She wasn’t even altogether sure where they were. He’d crush her mind to pieces long before he found them on his own.

She was staring up into Draco’s face. “I found what I was missing to remove your Dark Mark.”

“Oh.”

“Phoenix tears. I’d be able to remove it if I had a vial of Phoenix tears.”

She forced herself to focus through the pain. Narcissa. She had to show him what happened to Narcissa. Narcissa. Narcissa.

Narcissa’s portrait swam into view. “She didn’t want him to ever know. You don’t know what she put herself through to ensure he didn’t find out. You thought that potion’s withdrawal was difficult after three doses? She took it more than a dozen times just in order to see him. Draco used to beg her not to.”

Lucius stopped brutalizing his way through her mind and seemed frozen for several seconds.

Hermione seized the brief respite to scrabble through her memories for the right ones. There was a throbbing pain in the back of her head as though a scalpel were slowly sinking into the base of her skull.

Narcissa. Narcissa. She needed memories of Draco talking about Narcissa.

Draco's furious face appeared, and he glared down at her.

"After you and your friends had my father thrown into Azkaban, the Dark Lord went to my house. I wasn't even home from school yet. When I got there, he was waiting for me. He had my mother in a cage, in our drawing room. He'd been torturing her for nearly two weeks."

Lucius jerked. She could feel his growing horror.

"She—she never recovered. The tremors—they never stop, not after that much cruciatus. I don't even know what else he did to her—before I got there—," his voice broke. He shoved his hair away from his face and seemed to be struggling to breathe. "The whole summer—I couldn't… I couldn't do anything but tell her I was sorry."

Draco was breathing so rapidly his hands were shaking, and he kept talking, the words just pouring from him. "My mother—she—she was never very strong. She nearly died when she was pregnant with me, and she never recovered from it. She—was always fragile after that. My father always said we had to take care of her. He made me swear, again and again growing up, that I'd always take care of her. When the Dark Lord finally left the manor—I tried to get her away; somewhere he couldn't find her or hurt her again. But she wouldn't go —she wouldn't go anywhere without me."

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. "I was trying to take care of her. I was trying to keep her safe. I was trying to figure out a way to run—and then—she was burned to death in Lestrange Manor—"

Lucius wavered for a moment. Hermione thought perhaps he'd withdraw from her mind.

He shoved himself deeper into her buried memories.

Her mind was recoiling. She could feel an agonising, fracturing pain begin radiating out from the back of her head

There was screaming surrounding her.

Her voice. It sounded so much younger than she remembered it being. "D-did your father know?"

Draco swallowed. "No." He looked away. "My father—he—he was very protective of my mother. If he'd known—" He was silent for a moment. "Occlumency isn't a talent he has. Not to the level he would have needed it. He would have been vengeful, and it would have damned us all. My mother insisted we hide her condition from him. There was a potion prescribed by a Danish mind healer; it masked most of her symptoms. Prevented her from panicking when she was required to make appearances. She took it when my father visited. The Dark Lord had mostly kept my father in France and Belgium following his release. He assumed she was cold and distant because she blamed him for my taking the mark."

The memory shifted.

She and Draco were in bed together, his arms wrapped possessively around her as he rested his head on her chest.

“I’m going to take care of you. I swear, Hermione, I’m always going to take care of you.”

“Tell me about your mother, Draco,” she said as she traced her fingers across the runes on his back. “Tell me everything you could never tell anyone.”

...

“I’d never seen anyone tortured before,” he said without looking up at her. “She was—the first person I ever saw tortured. He—,” Hermione felt his jaw roll as he hesitated, “—he experimented on her and let—a few other Death Eaters contribute ideas about what to do to her. To punish the Malfoys.”

Lucius kept pushing, deeper and deeper into her mind. The memories started growing dimmer as though they were melting, breaking into pieces and fading away. The screaming kept going. On and on.

Hermione felt herself slipping away.

Everything shook, and the weight of Lucius’ mind inside hers suddenly vanished. There was pricking sensation in her arms and right leg

She sat slumped against the cage, gasping as she forced herself to stay conscious. The room swam slowly into view. The air was thick and hazy with dust and smoke.

Lucius was gone. Hermione looked down at herself in confusion. There were small splinters of debris buried in her arms. A sharp, tinny ringing filled her ears and wouldn’t seem to stop. She squinted and coughed when she tried to breathe.

She tried to get up but the room wobbled and turned red as she leaned forward. She sank back, a choked sob formed in her throat while she struggled to think.

She needed to…

What was it?

Needed...

The drawing room.

She needed to get out of the drawing room. Get to the door. Get to the door. Where was the door?

She glanced around in bewildered. There were flashes of light that she couldn’t make out clearly. The wall where the door should have been was gone. There was a cavernous hole in its place, as though the wall had been torn apart.

She had to get through it before Lucius came back. She tried to push herself shakily up. Her head throbbed so painfully the room wavered, and she nearly fainted. Her leg wouldn’t move. She looked down and realised there was a piece of wood buried in her calf.

The room was distorting in her vision. There was noise, but she couldn't make it out through the ringing. Lights kept flashing. She blinked and tried to look up to see what it was, but everything rippled and got darker. She slumped back.

She'd get up in a moment.

She just needed to catch her breath. If her head cleared a bit, it would be easier to move.

She reached up and touched her face with trembling hands. Her fingers came away red with blood…

The bars behind her shook abruptly and roused her. Hands took her by the shoulders and pulled her up from the place she'd been resting.

Blond.

She tried to pull herself away. "Please—don't— Don't—"

She was laid on her back and pale skin and hair filled her vision.

"God—Hermione—I'm so sorry. Hold on. You have to hold on."

The voice was elongated and distorted.

She squinted. "Draco?"

He was so pale she thought he might be a ghost.

"You came…" she reached out and touched him. He was really there. "I guess you always do —"

He was leaning over her, rapidly muttering healing spells.

"I'm sorry. I can't give you pain relief," he said. His voice was shaking. "Hold on for me. You're safe now. I'll get you out of here. I'm so—sorry."

She felt him pull the splinter of wood out of her leg. The pain tore through like fire, and she gave a ragged scream.

The unexpected additional agony cleared her mind, cutting through the dazed pain. Lucius had kidnapped her and forced his way into her mind. She gave a sharp gasp, and her chest started spasming.

"Oh god. Oh god. Oh god, Draco. He used legilimency and portkey. Is the baby alright? Did he hurt her?"

Draco was casting several spells on her injured hand, and she closed her fingers over his wand and shoved it down towards her stomach.

"Check on the baby," she said, her voice shaking. "I think he might have hurt her."

She couldn't breathe as Draco hesitated and then cast the spell. The brilliant golden light filled the room as the orb appeared, still steadily fluttering.

Hermione stared at it for several seconds before bursting into tears. She forced herself to sit up. The room began swimming but she forced herself to focus, gripping Draco's shirt tightly and looking into his eyes.

“He knows—I’m sorry. Your father knows. I told him what happened to your mother.” She had to lean close in order to make out the details of his face.

Draco froze and blinked. “It’s alright. It doesn’t matter,” he said after a moment. His hair brushed against her hair and he kissed her forehead. He slid a hand behind her waist and under her legs and picked her up. “I’ll take you back to your room and finish healing you. Then I’ll deal with everything here.”

He stood. She could feel that he was shaking. He was so pale; he might be bleeding somewhere. She wasn’t sure. She looked dazedly around the room. The floor was covered in rubble, and the entire wall where the door had been was gone.

Lucius was slumped down in the cage in the centre of the room. His wrists were shackled to bars on opposite sides of the cage.

To prevent him from touching his Dark Mark.

There was blood pooling on the floor from a wound in his side.

Draco noticed what she was staring at. “It was the quickest way to deal with him.”

Lucius stirred and his head tilted back as he stared at Draco and Hermione. His hair had fallen over his face, but his eyes were glittering with rage.

“Why didn’t you tell me what happened to your mother?” he asked, his voice a long snarl.

Hermione felt Draco’s fingers twitch against her spine. He released a low breath. “What would you have done that wouldn’t have killed her sooner?”

Lucius shifted, the metal shackles clanking against the bars. He jerked his head so he could see more clearly. “You should have told me. She was mine!”

Draco stared coldly at his father. “Yes. She was. And you saw to it that everyone knew it, didn’t you? Even the Dark Lord. You never let her go. Not when she begged to run after my fourth year. You loved her right into her grave.”

Lucius paled through the blood obscuring his face.

Draco gave a bitter laugh. “It always baffled me that you believed the Dark Lord would have used me to punish you when he had her. I suppose you never were as creative as the Dark Lord.”

Lucius said nothing for several moments, then he cocked his head to the side. “What are you doing now? The Mudblood spread her legs to comfort you and so you imagine yourself saving her instead?”

Draco said nothing.

Lucius leaned forward. “You won’t survive it. If she escapes, the Dark Lord will hold you responsible.”

Draco snorted. “I don’t imagine there are many circumstances in which I survive the next several months even if she stays.” Lucius’ eyes narrowed. “You knew.”

Draco nodded with a cold smirk. “Information is my specialty, Father.”

He was outwardly calm, but Hermione could feel his entire body shaking.

Lucius shifted forward and studied Draco as if he were reevaluating him. His eyes were burning. “And what do you intend to do with me?”

“What do you think? You snapped and nearly compromised my assignment. In the process of recovering the Mudblood, I had to kill you. I have memories to corroborate it.”

Lucius nodded, seemingly unsurprised. “I want to see Narcissa.”

Draco hesitated and then nodded. “I imagine she’ll speak to you now. I’ll have the elves bring her portrait. You have until I return.”

Lucius was silent.

Draco turned towards the door. Hermione rested her forehead against his shoulder as he picked his way through the rubble. Her head lolled back.

“Just a little longer, Granger. Stay conscious for me.”

There was another sharp pain in her lower abdomen and she gripped his robes.

They were nearly out of the drawing room when Lucius spoke again.

“What would you do if I offered to save you, Draco?”

Draco barely reacted, he continued walking away without response. Hermione lifted her head and looked over his shoulder at Lucius.

His head was tilted back as he stared across the room at her, his eyes glittering.

“Phoenix tears, isn’t it?” His lips parted in a rictus, revealing his bloodstained teeth. “How many do you need?”

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A warning for readers: This chapter contains a scene containing a medical procedure and gore. Asterisks have been included to indicate the beginning and end of the section.

Draco still didn't stop, but Hermione squeezed his arm and tried to slip down. She stared at Lucius, her heart in her throat.

Draco paused. "Don't, Granger."

"Draco—if he has Phoenix tears…" She forced him to set her down, gripping his arm tightly to keep herself upright as she looked wide-eyed at Lucius.

The blood was drying and crusting along his face. She had to squint in order to see him clearly from across the room.

"I would need fifteen tears," she said.

Lucius tilted his head to the side, looking thoughtful. "How many tears would half a vial be?"

Hermione swallowed, her heart dropping with disappointment so sharp it was physically painful. "It depends on whether it's a standardized vial. A modern half vial is only about twelve drops."

Lucius' eyebrows furrowed. "What if it were an older vial, from the fifteenth century?"

Hermione gave a small gasp and swayed on her feet. "They were bigger then. Do you—do you actually have Phoenix tears?"

Lucius smiled cruelly. "What would you do? What would you give me if I did?"

Draco scoffed. "Don't waste your time with him, Granger. The only reason he even cares is because I haven't produced an heir."

He picked her up and walked away rapidly.

Hermione rested her head on his shoulder as he carried her through the house. Her head felt fractured, but she forced herself to focus through the pain.

When they passed through the door into her room, he called, "Bobbin!"

The name was nearly a snarl. Bobbin instantly appeared and began groveling on the floor. "Master Draco! Master Draco, Bobbin is being so sorry. Bobbin is not knowing how Master Lucius is taking the Miss from her room."

"It was the spoon on the breakfast tray. It was a portkey," Hermione said. There was a dragging sensation in the back of her head as though she were falling backwards.

Bobbin gave a cry of despair and began ramming her head into the floor repeatedly. The thudding sound made Hermione wince and cringe.

"Stop injuring yourself." Draco's voice was ice cold. "Bring me all the healing supplies, and send

two elves to transport my mother's portrait to the South drawing room. Then get out of my sight."

He paused in front of the portrait in Hermione's room. "Father wishes to see you, Mother. If you ever want to speak to him, this is your last opportunity."

He turned away before the portrait could respond and carried Hermione towards her bed.

It seemed like only a moment had passed, but she was suddenly on the bed in clean clothes, the medical supplies laid out across one side of it. Draco was dousing several cloths in Essence of Dittany and wrapping them around her hand and leg before looking up.

Horror was written into his face. His eyes flickered, and his expression closed the instant their eyes met.

"I'm sorry... I was afraid the explosion might kill you, or I would have come sooner. I'm so sorry."

Hermione shook her head dismissively, trying to clear it and stay focused. "Draco… he might have Phoenix tears."

His expression tensed briefly. "Granger, don't."

He waved his wand, but his fingers spasmed abruptly mid-spell. The wand emitted a blue flame that guttered out after a moment. His expression rippled, and his jaw set as he carefully waved his wand again and cast a diagnostic on her brain.

Her brain projection appeared. The fractured, brightly glowing lights across her brain were still there, but several lights had lost the golden glow and turned blood red. Tiny threads of scarlet, like lightning fractals, branched through sections of her brain.

Draco turned grey when he saw it. "I need—I need to call a mind healer."

He stood to leave, but Hermione gripped his wrist and pulled him back. "No. Draco, wait— your father said he has Phoenix tears. You have to find out what he wants in exchange for them."

He pulled his wrist free, his expression set. "Granger—there's no point in finding out." Hermione stared at him, incredulous. "What—What do you mean there's no point? I could get your mark off." Her chest jerked, and she gripped his hand again. "You have to find out— you have to ask—Please, Draco—, please—"

Her lungs started spasming as she begged.

He stared at her for several seconds and sighed, dropping down on the edge of her bed. He wrapped arms around her shoulders until her breathing slowed.

He sat back and looked down at his hands.

"Granger—" he paused for a moment. "I'm ruined as duelist now."

Hermione watched his fingers as the index finger twitched and the thumb abruptly jerked. He curled his hands into fists. "A week ago it might have been different. But now—" he lifted his right hand. The ring finger kept twitching. "Not now. The only reason I won against my father today was because he didn't actually want to kill me."

"Draco—" He cut her off with a tight voice. "I can't defeat the Dark Lord for you, Granger. I know

you want to save everyone, but I can't kill him—even if you got my mark off. If I go and try, I'll fail, and I'd probably be taken alive." He still wasn't looking at her. "If I'm interrogated—" he looked down, and she could see the rigid tension in his jaw and shoulders, "—even if you obliviate me before I go, eventually he'd learn about you, Ginny, and James, and the approximate location of the safe house. I'm—" his mouth twisted, "I'd—"

"Draco—" Her voice caught and wavered as she captured his face in her hands and turned it so that his eyes met hers. "Draco, I'm not going to remove your mark so you can die in the rubble with Voldemort. I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to save you."

Her arms were shaking, but she didn't let go of him. "I can save you if you let me. Let me get your mark off and run away. Run away with me the way we always said we would."

He stared at her for a moment, and the corner of his mouth quirked up wistfully. "I made an Unbreakable Vow, Granger. There's no—"

"I know about your vow. You made it to me." She cut him off, staring intently into his silver eyes, gripping his right hand tightly in hers until she could almost feel the magic between them. "Draco Malfoy, you have done your best to aid to Order of the Phoenix in defeating Voldemort. I am the last Order member. I consider your Unbreakable Vow fulfilled in excess."

She pulled his face closer until she could press her forehead against his. "You have done more than anyone should have ever asked from you. Let me save you now. Please, take the risk of believing that I can."

Draco sat frozen for several seconds. She could feel him waver.

Then he slowly nodded. Lucius was on his knees in the cage, leaning forward as much as he was physically able towards the portrait in front of him.

His expression as he stared at it was starved. Possessive. Ravenous.

He was crying. Hermione could see his entire body shake.

He glanced up and caught sight of her and Draco at the door. He instantly jerked back, his expression closing.

The room had been cleared and cleaned of most of the rubble and blood.

Hermione walked slowly across the room until she stood only a few feet away from the cage. Her head still hurt so sharply it felt as though her skull were fractured. She'd taken several strengthening potions in order to walk reliably, but her vision still blurred slightly.

Draco had wanted to call a healer, but she'd refused. If their escape was going to work, Lucius' attack had to be contained.

Lucius' mouth curved into a ghastly smile as he stared at them. "Well, well, it's my son, come to see me to the afterlife, accompanied by the Mudblood whore who seduced him."

"Lucius!" Narcissa's voice was sharp.

He flinched visibly, as though he'd been struck. Emotions rapidly flashing across his face. Shock. Guilt. Remorse.

He looked back at the portrait.

“Cissa…”

Narcissa had lost her earlier appearance of composure. She looked shattered.

“She’s all he has,” Narcissa said.

Lucius’ expression soured with barely concealed disapproval, but he gave a begrudging nod of acknowledgement before looking back up.

The corner of Hermione’s mouth twitched, and she stepped closer, studying him. He was covered in cuts from the splinters of wood, his cheek sliced open and bleeding down his jaw and throat. The wound on his side had stopped bleeding. He was injured and in considerably more physical pain that he was letting on, but there was nothing worryingly lethal.

She stepped back again. “How do you have Phoenix tears?”

Lucius stared at her and raised an eyebrow. “The Malfoy Family has been in England for nearly a thousand years. We were gifted a vial during the fifteenth century, in exchange for— certain services rendered. It is only to be used to preserve the family line. It is passed down from father to son when a new heir is born.”

“Really?” Draco’s voice was cold and skeptical. “You have a vial of Phoenix tears that you never thought to mention, without any record?”

Lucius’ expression grew lofty. “It is only used to preserve the line. Do you have an heir, Draco? No. You do not.” His tone was vicious and full of derision. “The vial is kept in a chest that holds the blood of each generation. If you had an heir, his blood would be added upon his birth, and from that time forward, unless you died, only you, his father, could open the chest. When he had a son of his own, the chest would pass into his possession.”

Draco looked at the portrait. “Did you—know about this, mother?”

Narcissa shook her head, and Draco’s shoulders dropped as though he’d been braced against her answer. He swallowed and gave a sharp nod. “Where is it? An additional vault in Gringotts?”

“It should be in my room at the moment,” Lucius said in a bland voice. He’d sat back languidly in the cage.

Draco blinked. “There has been a vial of Phoenix tears on the estate this entire time?”

“No,” Lucius said, rolling his eyes, “it is intended to preserve the family line. I keep it with me.”

Draco stared at Lucius for several seconds. “What do you want for it? What is it you expect in exchange?”

Lucius gave a low, unending laugh until Hermione wanted to strike him. He tilted his head into an unnatural angle so that his hair fell away from his eyes. “Why, Draco, why do you think I would require bribing in order to save my own son?”

Draco snorted. Something flashed briefly in Lucius’ eyes, and he straightened. “I will save you, Draco, because you are my son and heir, without asking for anything in return from you.”

Lucius' eyes strayed from his son.

"What do you want from me?" Hermione asked.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Ten minutes. Alone."

"Out of the question," Draco said in a cold voice.

Lucius rolled his eyes and waved a shackled wrist. "What possible benefit would I derive from harming her at this point?" "What benefit have you ever derived?" Draco looked feral as he sneered down at his father. "I'm not leaving her alone with you. I'd rather die."

Lucius twitched.

Hermione rested her hand on Draco's arm. "I'll be fine, Draco."

She didn't entirely believe it, but she was past caring. She was ready to risk everything if it meant she could obtain Phoenix tears.

"Granger—"

She slipped her hand to his and looked up into his eyes. "Just ten minutes."

Draco didn't move. Didn't waver.

She squeezed his hand. "Please, Draco. You told me you'd let me save you."

He studied her, his expression guarded. His silver eyes were like mirrors to the point that she could see herself in them. Her eyes and the red of her clothing. She was paler than she'd realised.

"Please, Draco…"

He nodded reluctantly. "I'll stand by the door."

Before he left, he stalked over to his father and started going through his robes, confiscating several weapons and a variety of objects Hermione couldn't identify.

Lucius had three additional wands concealed in his clothing, a tin containing a dragon's heartstring, and an entire set of torture instruments shrunk into the size of a pocketbook. Draco cast several detection spells and seemed to find something new with each of them.

"I don't even have use of my hands, I don't see how or why you expect me to murder her," Lucius said in a sulky tone as Draco extracted the last wand.

Draco just wordlessly stashed everything in his own pockets with a sneer and then cast a careless tergeo spell on Lucius as he straightened.

Lucius hissed as the blood was roughly scoured off his face.

Draco stared down at his father for a moment. "Ten minutes. I will set mother's portrait on fire before your eyes if you attempt to so much as touch Hermione." Cold rage shone in Lucius' eyes as Draco walked away.

Hermione and Lucius stared at each other.

He didn't say anything; he just studied her. His silver eyes were intent as though he were weighing and measuring who she was. After a minute, she spoke. "If you expect to make me promise that I'll give him up and disappear once he's safely away, the answer is no."

He blinked and leaned forward. "What do you intend to do with my son?"

She gazed steadily down at him. "I intend to save him."

Lucius' eyes narrowed. "Then what?"

She twitched a shoulder. "Then—we live. There are no plans after that. Everything else is dust. What's left of us is all there is."

He scoffed at her. The noise rattled in his lungs, and he coughed, reddening his lips. "You're fools if you think you can run and disappear. The Dark Lord will never let him go. You'll be hunted down. Unless he has power he can maintain, neither of you will survive. If you want to stay safe and be taken care of, you'll give up your romantic ideation. There's a family in Bul—"

"Draco made an Unbreakable Vow to the Order never to claim Voldemort's power or become a Dark Lord."

Lucius fell into an astonished silence for several seconds.

"He. Did. What?" His voice was deadly.

The corner of Hermione's mouth threatened to twitch, but she forced herself to continue staring at him impassively. "The Order feared that Draco was using us to further his own ambition. To prove his loyalty, he vowed to do his best to defeat Voldemort, and that following the Dark Lord's defeat, he would never seize power or become a Dark Lord."

She knelt down so that her face was close to Lucius'. "You're right, he does plan to save me. Since the moment I arrived, everything he's done has been to protect me and for the purpose of getting me somewhere safe before he commits suicide, so that no one can ever find me. That's his plan. That's his idea of taking care of me. But I want to save him. I made promises to him too. I will do anything to save him."

Lucius' expression grew mocking. "Except give him up."

She looked down for a moment before meeting his eyes. "Except that." Her throat tightened as she swallowed. "I'm—I'm more selfish than he is."

"And how do you imagine yourself saving him?" Lucius asked in a cold voice. "Will you send me off to kill the Dark Lord in order to avenge my wife and save my heir?"

He said it derisively, but his eyes were glittering.

Hermione stared at him calmly. "No. There's too much margin for error. Even if you could, killing Voldemort won't protect Draco from everyone else who will want him dead. After you help me remove Draco's Dark Mark, I need you to kill yourself." Lucius gave a wet sounding laugh. "I wondered when your true colours would come out. Maybe you did level Sussex." He tilted his head back. "Why should I regard leaving my son in your hands for the rest of his life as somehow better than his death?"

He was baiting her. He wanted her to beg, she could see it in his eyes.

The Mudblood whore who seduced his son, that was what he saw her as. A paltry source of comfort that Draco had grown attached to while grieving over his mother. In another life, in a slightly shifted set of circumstances, Draco would have gladly walked over her corpse.

Her throat tightened, and she forced herself to keep breathing.

The only way to keep Draco alive was by convincing Lucius to willingly agree to her terms.

She would make Lucius agree.

She would save Draco.

She looked over at the portrait. “He looks like Narcissa, doesn’t he? I didn’t see it at first, but now I can’t look at her without noticing it. It must have been difficult when she was sick and after her death, to always see her.” She looked back at Lucius. “But—it’s all fading away now, isn’t it? He’s not the same as he was. This war has carved away almost everything about him. And now Voldemort is destroying him on purpose.”

Lucius’ mouth hardened into a flat line.

Hermione held his gaze and let her desperation show on her face. Looking at Lucius was like brushing against salvation with her fingertips, but finding she wasn’t close enough to fully grasp it. Her heart felt like a fluttering bird caged inside her chest, beating itself to death as it kept fighting to escape.

Her lips twitched. “Voldemort will kill him. Even if Draco weren’t a spy, even if he was the most unfailingly loyal Death Eater to ever exist, Voldemort would still torture and eventually kill him, just to make sure there’s no one who can surpass him. Phoenix tears won’t reverse a Killing Curse. They don’t reverse the brain and nerve damage from the cruciatus.”

She touched the bars of the cage with her fingertips. “I’m sure you realised that he became a spy to avenge Narcissa. He knew we probably wouldn’t win. He was certain he’d be killed for it, but he did it anyway. It was his penance—because he’d always promised he'd take care of her. He’s never—” her voice fractured, “—he’s never expected to have a life outside this war. Not when he was trying to protect Narcissa, and not now with me. He’s always assumed it’ll be the last thing he does.”

Hermione shifted forward. “I’ve tried everything I can to find a way to save him. I’ve had so many ideas but I never had the pieces I needed to make them work. If you really have Phoenix tears, I can save his life, but only if you’ll help me. If saving him is enough for you.”

She wrapped her fingers around the bar. “I can’t promise to leave him because I’ve already given him my word that I never will. But I can promise this: once he’s free, if he ever wants to leave me—I’ll let him go.”

Lucius leaned closer until their faces were only inches away from each other. His silver eyes were cruel and burning. “Swear it on your magic.” Her mouth twitched, and her fingers spasmed where they were gripping the cold steel.

She didn’t give herself time to hesitate. “I swear it on my magic. If Draco ever wants to leave me, I’ll let him go. You have my word.”

Lucius stared at her a moment longer and then sighed and leaned back. “The chest is in my wardrobe. My wand will unlock the door. I’ll open it once it’s brought, and you can see if there are even enough tears.”

He looked back at the portrait and seemingly forgot about Hermione entirely.

She studied the starved, desperate adoration on his face for a moment before she stood slowly. It wasn’t surprising that Draco had never thought his father had space to care for anyone but his mother.

She walked unsteadily across the room. Everything hurt. Even her heartbeat felt painful. The room was so unnaturally cold.

Draco watched her approach from the doorway. His eyes were worried. She gave him a wan smile.

“He says you can use his wand to open the door of his wardrobe,” she said. “The chest is there, he said he’ll open it.”

Draco pulled her away from the drawing room. “I’m taking you back to your room.”

Hermione had barely nodded before he was carrying her again.

“I can walk,” she said, trying to slip down, “you’re still recovering.”

“You should be in bed,” Draco said in a cold voice.

Hermione was too tired to argue. She buried her face in his robes and half-dozed as he carried her through the manor. She should have been manic with adrenaline, but instead she was tired. She was so tired.

“He does love you,” she said as they neared her room. “I just don’t think he knows how to look at you without seeing your mother.”

“I know.” He set her on the bed. “Rest, Granger. If I come back and you’re reading, I will call a mind-healer in, I don’t care what your plan is.”

She nodded cooperatively. Her head was hurting so much she didn’t think she was actually capable of reading. She felt like she might pass out. “If there are tears, the elves have a list of the potion ingredients I need and all the supplies. I need all of them, best quality possible. Your entire medical inventory needs to be restocked. Tell Ginny not to come, and sever the bloodwards you have with the estate. They have to lapse or—”

“You explained it earlier, Granger. Stop talking and rest.”

She curled tightly around her stomach.

He pulled the duvet up over her shoulder, and she caught his hand; gripping it desperately. “Draco—you have to help me make this work. I don’t think that—” her voice stalled, and she hesitated. “Promise?” Draco was silent for a moment. “I’ll take care of everything.”

It was evening when Draco woke her. There were half a dozen diagnostics conjured around her that he was studying.

Her hand and leg had healed fully, and the baby was still a bright golden light. The light made her

head ache.

“I need to call a mind healer,” Draco said when she sat up wincing.

Hermione shook her head. “No. It’s not worth the risk. I’m fine. It’s just a headache. I’m not having a seizure. It’s fine, the memories are probably just—a bit murky now. It’s not as though a healer would actually be able to do anything about it. The damage is already done.”

His expression tightened.

She looked up at him, her heart pounding rapidly in her chest. “Do you have it? Are they really Phoenix tears?”

Draco withdrew a vial of silvery liquid from his robes and handed it to her.

“There’s an analytic spell, to confirm they’re really tears,” she said, her voice tight and nervous as she turned it over in her hand. “They might not work. If they’re really that old. There’s no research on preserving tears more than a few years.”

Draco cast the spell.

Hermione’s vision doubled, but she squinted through it and studied it carefully.

It was a vial of pure tears. The reading was perfect; the efficiency was still exact. They had been perfectly preserved.

There were enough. She could tell just by looking at the irregular size of the vial that there were at least fifteen tears. She stared down at the vial in her hands for several seconds, trying to absorb the reality of what she held. Her stomach was fluttering, and she felt breathless.

She could do it. Draco was going to live.

She was going to save him.

“We’ll need to do everything in the drawing room,” she finally said. “There’s so much magic already there that new spell signatures will be lost. Is everything ready? Did you contact Ginny?”

Draco nodded slowly. “She’s aware of what we’re going to attempt. The elves have everything ready. My—my mother intends to stay. She doesn’t want to leave my father.”

Hermione studied his face for a moment before standing and reaching out for him. The room swam. Draco caught her by the elbow.

She held his robes until she found her bearings again. She drew a deep breath before forcing a smile. “I never ate breakfast. I should probably take a few potions.”

Her stomach rebelled, but she forced herself to keep down a strengthening potion and a nutritional potion long enough for her body to absorb them. Her head stopped feeling cracked and hollow. She stood up again and walked slowly around the room. Her calf was still sore, but her hand was fully healed. She bent and unfurled her fingers to check their dexterity. A Calming Draught would help manage her tremors once she needed to do spellwork.

Her vision slowly stopped doubling.

As long as the lights weren't too bright, she'd be alright.

Draco stood watching her. His expression was closed, but his eyes were pensive and worried. "Granger, you—"

"We're going to do this, Draco," she said, cutting him off. "If it were me, would it even be a question?"

He reluctantly shook his head.

"I can do this. I'll be fine. Once we escape, I can recover for as long as I need to. After I save you."

She went over to the doorway and walked through without hesitation.

Lucius was still in the cage in the drawing room.

Hermione's stomach curdled as she entered the room for the third time that day.

"Bobbin," said Draco, his tone still vicious. The elf appeared at the entrance of the drawing room.

"Bring everything here, and get the horse ready."

Hermione chewed nervously on her lip. "Once my manacles are off, how long do you think we'll safely have until it's noticed?"

"I doubt you'll have more than half an hour," Lucius said.

Hermione nodded. "That's about what I thought. So, twenty minutes to get the Dark Mark off, and then a few extra minutes to leave. It—it might take longer than twenty minutes, but that's the best time I've gotten in practice. We need to do as much as possible before my manacles are removed. We'll have to brew the potion beforehand."

She looked at Lucius. "In order for this to work, everyone has to believe that Draco has died, that we all died. Can you do that?"

He glowered at her. "Easily. Assuming that my wand is returned."

She nodded and turned away. The elves had brought in a large table that extended across nearly the length of the room. On one half, there were potion supplies laid out. On the other end, healing supplies: bandages, dozens of vials of Blood-Replenishing potion, Essence of Dittany, eye wateringly expensive pain relief, and several spools of acromantula silk. Hermione arranged it all carefully.

There was a smaller table nearby with a pile of wands and a satchel on it.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Her satchel. She reached out and opened it. It was still packed with all her alchemy and potion supplies, as well as a full assortment of healing potions and supplies. "You kept it," she said as her fingers ran across the waxed canvas.

"It was useful," said Draco in a dry voice. He watched her intently as she inspected the contents.

There was a set of travel clothes, with riding breeches set with buttons to accommodate her stomach. Draco conjured a screen, and she nearly tore off her surrogate robes, leaving them in a pile on the

floor as she pulled the new clothing on. There was a padded gambeson coat beside her cloak, and her boots were hung over the back of a chair, alongside a pair of buttery leather gloves. Draco's heavy black cloak hung beside it.

She laced up her boots and looked up at Draco. "You have everything? You're ready?"

He nodded and she stood.

"You're not going to be in any state to guide a horse. Not until some of the potions wear off. Where should I have the horse go until you're lucid?" Draco's expression grew more tense than it already was. "It knows the way. Just tell her to go home. Her mate is at the safe house. She won't fly anywhere else."

Hermione nodded, her fingers twitching nervously. She hadn't ridden a horse since she flew a Thestral to the Ministry of Magic in her fifth year of school.

She braced herself, she refused to have a panic attack.

She turned back to the table and placed the silver cauldron on the stand. "I'll need you to do the spellwork for me, Draco."

Her heart raced, but brewing a potion felt as natural as breathing.

She started with white cedar oil, warming it gently as she added crushed valerian roots. When it grew aromatic, she poured honeywater slowly down the sides of the cauldron until it was halfway full.

"I need the most intense flame you can conjure now," she told Draco as she turned to inspect the Dittany leaves that the house-elves had minced and placed under stasis.

She used a spoon to shift the minced leaves and verified every piece was surgically precise and uniform.

The cauldron was boiling almost violently as the base was reduced to a syrup.

She set to grinding the dried nettle and yarrow until they were a fine powder. Her ears were ringing slightly, and she blinked and shook her head as she focused on the mortar and pestle in her hands.

She ground a half-dozen fairy wings in another pestle until they shone like silver dust and then sifted all the powder together.

She dipped a copper stirring rod into the potion, and when she withdrew it, she counted to three before a thickened drop collected and fell back into the cauldron.

"Cool it to room temperature as rapidly as you can," she said in a tight voice.

The instant the surface of the liquid was still, she poured the powders across the surface in a slow figure eight. Count to ten. She placed thirty rose petals across the surface over the powder which was beginning to crystallise. Draco removed the stasis, and she added an even layer of Dittany on top.

The potion sat still for several seconds before the entire surface turned translucent. Hermione immediately added crushed geranium and stirred rapidly with an ash stir rod, dropping pickled

murtlap tentacles in with every fourth rotation. The potion turned a brilliant blue.

“Simmering. It needs to barely move.”

She used a dropper to carefully measure out the tears. Fifteen. Exactly fifteen. There were two drops left in the vial. She stared at the simmering potion. It looked flawless. Exactly the way it should.

Her hands shook slightly.

“Draco, I need a Calming Draught.”

He handed it to her without a word. She swallowed it in a single gulp. Her hands stopped shaking.

She added the tears. Even with Calming Draught, her heart was in her throat.

When the last drop was added, she stood frozen as she watched. The silvery tears slid beneath the surface, luminous, as though they were falling stars. They slowly turned blood red. The colour spread through the rest of the potion and held.

“Flagon.”

A silver ladle, dusted in powdered unicorn horn, transferred the potion into a glass flagon.

Hermione stoppered it and released a slow breath. “That’s it.”

“That removes the Dark Mark?” Lucius said, staring curiously at the potion in her hands.

She looked over at him, and her stomach twisted. “No. This stops the curse from killing him after I cut his arm off.”

Lucius stared at her blankly before his expression grew murderous.

“You intend to maim my son?” He lunged against the bars of the cage as he sneered at her. “You claimed to be an ingenious healer and cutting off his arm is the best you can do?”

Hermione’s heart was pounding painfully in her chest as she gripped the flagon and stared at him. A burst of heat flared in the pit of her stomach. “You may have noticed I don’t have magic at the moment. It’s been two years since I cast a spell, and the instant my manacles are removed, I’m on a countdown. I’ll have twenty minutes to perform a procedure that should take an hour with a surgical team. I won’t even have my own wand.”

Her hands started shaking violently. She set down the potion on the table. “If I had a better idea, I would be trying it. Do you think—I *want* to cut off his arm—?” Her voice was vibrating.

She wanted to scream at him.

She turned away and pressed her hands again her sternum, fighting to breathe.

She’d never performed an amputation on anyone whose limbs weren’t entirely destroyed beyond all hope. The Phoenix tears had been such an impossible missing piece. She’d been so relieved to have them she hadn’t fully processed the reality that she was about to cut Draco’s arm off. She felt as though she was about to be violently sick.

She could vaguely hear Draco saying something to his father.

Her throat was closing.

She stumbled across the room to the far wall and pressed herself against it as she struggled to breathe. She choked back a sob, smothering it with her hands, and stood shaking.

She felt fingertips brush lightly across her shoulder and flinched as the guilt almost shattered her.

“I’m so sorry, Draco. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” Her voice was broken as she turned to look at him. “I swear if there was another way quick enough, I’d do it. I’m so sorry —”

Her voice cut off as she sobbed. “You have such beautiful hands. I always thought—you had such beautiful hands—”

Draco held her face in his hands, and she gripped his wrists tightly while she stood crying for several minutes. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and she sobbed and tried to memorise it.

“Granger, I always assumed if I escaped, I’d lose my hand,” he said in a low voice, dropping his head against hers and tucking a curl behind her ear. “If I could have, I would have cut it off myself years ago.”

She swallowed a sob and nodded. “I know. I just—I really did try to find another way. I really did. I don’t want you to think I would if I had any other choice.”

She brushed her tears away, drawing a deep breath as she turned back.

She forced herself not to look at Lucius as she walked over and reviewed all the medical supplies, painstakingly laid out in the order that she needed them. She ran the procedure through her mind, verifying that she had everything she’d need.

Her manacles were burning around her wrists.

“I’m ready.” She turned to face Draco and Lucius, extending her hands.

Draco’s face was expressionless, but his eyes were molten silver. He reached into his robes and withdrew Lucius’ wand.

He extended it slowly towards his father, his expression growing dangerous. “If you—”

“If I harm her, you will undoubtedly blaspheme your mother’s memory, torture me most horribly, and we will all die dreadfully. I am aware, Draco,” Lucius said, snatching his wand back. “Shouldn’t you be focused more on your own wellbeing and impending maiming? You couldn’t have fallen for a more competent healer?” Draco just sneered at him before looking back at Hermione. He took her hands gently in his and pressed her inner wrists together.

“Hold the manacles like this,” he said.

As she studied his fingers wrapped around her wrists, her eyes burned, but she blinked the tears away. Draco looked up at her. “Ready?”

She nodded without a word.

Draco and Lucius looked at each other and then extended their wands.

“Morsmordre.”

The Dark Marks slithered from their wands, but instead of traveling upwards, the green mist encircled Hermione’s manacles and disappeared beneath the shining copper. There was a brief pause.

A quiet click and the manacles unclasped, falling to the ground.

Hermione gave a low gasp and nearly fell over as her magic suddenly came roaring back to her.

It was as though every cell in her body were glowing and the compulsions were jerked free of her consciousness.

She felt high. She hadn’t realised how she’d adapted to the lack of magic until it returned like a tidal wave.

There was a sense of euphoria. She had magic. She could cast and cast and cast. She would bend the world to her will. Create and form, dissolve and destroy, and… save Draco.

She focused through the exhilaration rushing through her veins.

She pulled on her magic, and it didn’t fade, or vanish, or turn on her. She wrenched it inward, drew towards her mind, and slammed her occlumency walls into place. Blocking out everything.

Cold. Crystal clear.

She picked up one of the wands and flicked it. It was like forcing something down a blocked channel. The wand gave a few halfhearted sparks. She tried the next, trying to find one that felt right. A wand that was responsive and attuned to her.

Nothing. Nothing. Very little.

Her shoulders grew more and more tense as she began running out of options. Draco even handed her Lucius’ wand to try. Her stomach began twisting with dread. She started to pick up the last wand and then hesitated, looking up at Draco. “This was your old wand from school.”

“It was. Hawthorn and unicorn hair. They don’t turn to the Dark Arts.”

As her fingers slipped around the handle, she felt her magic stir, warming her fingertips. She picked it up and waved it through the air.

The room filled with lights.

There was an itching in her fingers to experiment; to cast something superfluous or transfigure a few vials on the table. She ignored the temptation.

She’d already lost three minutes finding a wand.

She conjured a twenty minute hourglass and flipped it, starting her countdown. “Lie on the table,” she instructed Draco in a sharp voice. She flicked the wand and summoned several vials to herself. She felt a rush through her entire body but forced herself to ignore it.

“Take all of these. Then I’m going to stun you.”

“No,” Draco said in a flat voice as he downed the line up of potions.

Hermione didn't look at him as she summoned the bandages and cut off the entire sleeve of his shirt. "Draco, I don't want you to watch me cut off your arm."

"I doubt it could possibly be more traumatic than anything I haven't already experienced," he said through his teeth. "Don't you *dare* stun me, Granger."

She glanced up at him for a moment and found that he was nearly grey and his eyes were burning with determination. And terrified.

Nine attempts.

He'd seen nine Death Eaters die while trying to remove their Dark Marks. If she stunned him and it went wrong, he wouldn't wake up, he'd just die. This would be goodbye.

She pressed her lips together into a flat line and summoned an additional potion. "Fine. Take this now, then."

While the potions activated, she took his left hand in hers and used the wand tip to trace several glowing lines across his skin around the circumference of his forearm, trying to save as much of his arm as she could while still carefully avoiding the Dark Mark burned into his skin. Then she anesthetised his arm from the shoulder down.

"Are you certain there's no other way of removing his mark?" Lucius' condescendingly vicious voice interrupted her concentration. "How much research did you actually—" Draco silenced his father with a sharp flick of his wand, still gripped in his right hand.

Hermione was casting spells faster than she had ever done spellwork in her life. She knew his health and vitals intimately. She conjured over a dozen diagnostic and monitoring spells around him. His heart rate was elevated but steadily slowing as the potions took affect.

One of the diagnostics turned blue, indicating that all the potions were fully integrated. She brought his left hand up to her lips, squeezing it and pressing her lips against it once before meeting his eyes.

"I love you. I love you," she whispered. "This will work, I swear."

Then she pinned his arm to the table and immobilised him.

****

She began with the process of internally ligating and then cauterising the veins and arteries in his forearm. The fewer places he could bleed from when she started cutting, the lower the risk. The curse was designed to force him to bleed to death; any opportunity for blood loss increased the risk, even with the Phoenix tears.

When the diagnostic scan showed that the blood flow to his forearm had been completely stopped, she drew a slow breath and ran the wand along one of the lines she'd drawn across the skin. Draco jerked involuntarily as she ligated and then severed the nerves in his arm. She didn't let herself look up.

She angled the wand at a sharp diagonal angle and began cutting through his skin and muscle down to the bone.

She vaguely registered the sound of Narcissa sobbing. She kept working.

Draco gave a ragged gasp and suddenly there was blood everywhere, the cauterised veins and arteries forcibly beginning to open themselves. The diagnostic spells began flashing and turning dangerous warning hues. Draco's heart rate sky-rocketed.

She cast a powerful stasis spell on his arm and snatched up the Phoenix tear potion.

She tilted Draco's head up and upended the contents down his throat, casting a spell to prevent his body from regurgitating it. She could feel him shaking through the immobilisation.

She met his eyes as her wand spun rapidly in her fingers, and she cast spell after spell on him.

"Hold on. Stay with me. I'm going to save you. Trust me. You're not going to die." His eyes were locked on her face as she cast spells on his heart to stabilise and slow it until the potion took affect.

She touched his cheek as she studied the diagnostics. "You and me and our baby. We're all going to be free. I'm going to save you. We'll go so far away no one will ever find us. You have to hold on."

The diagnostics stabilised, and she dosed him immediately with a vial of blood-replenishing potion.

Hermione didn't have time to even register her relief. She started re-cauterising all the ruptured veins and arteries as quickly as she could.

"Draco, look away," she said in a voice as taut as a bowstring. She didn't have time to verify that he had.

She turned back, muttered a spell, and cut through his radius and ulna.

His arm was removed.

Her hand shook slightly, and she countered the sticking charm, clinically moving the severed limb away, covering it with a cloth.

She could feel the time running out.

She smoothed the bones, drilled several tiny holes and then washed the entire area with Essence of Dittany before summoning a spool of acromantula silk and rapidly suturing the tendons to the bones. She'd visualised, practiced, and reviewed the procedure a thousand times in her room, the precise order of every movement. Once she'd completed the myodesis, she began wand-suturing layer after rapid layer of stitches. They were quicker to perform and more forgiving than the spellwork she'd used on his runes. Her fingers twitched, and she didn't have time to fix the crooked stitches.

She was running out of time.

Stitch after stitch, layer after layer until the fascial tissue met neatly.

******* *"Ferula,"* she said, drawing her wand along his skin. Bandages wrapped firmly around his arm nearly up to his shoulder.**

"There," she said, stepping back and giving herself a moment to breathe raggedly. There were drops of perspiration on her face. She was still gasping with relief as she countered the immobilisation on Draco. He was barely conscious. She began carefully inspecting all the diagnostics and monitor spells surrounding him as the sand in the hourglass ran out. He was stable, although drained both physically and magically. There were still traces of the curse, but the most deadly aspects were

countered. She gave him a potion meant for countering vampire antivenin, and it improved his blood platelet count.

Lucius banged his shackles loudly against the bars of the cage. Hermione turned sharply, and countered the silencing spell Draco had used on him.

“I hope you’re done. You’ve run out of time. I’m being summoned,” he said in a tight voice.

Her stomach plummeted, and she nodded. She pulled on her coat, cloak and gloves, and, with a flick of her wand, cast a spell on Draco to make him lighter. She wrapped his robes and cloak tightly around him, muttering warming charms, and put a dragonhide glove onto his remaining hand before taking hold of his right arm, pulling it over her shoulder to help him stand.

She picked up Lucius’ wand from the table where it lay and held it towards him. “You can do it? You’ll do it?”

He sneered at her as he jerked his wand from her hand. “Get out of my house, Mudblood.”

Hermione spelled all the supplies and extra wands into her satchel and slung it over her shoulder, turning and half-carrying Draco across the room towards the door.

“Draco…” Lucius spoke when they were nearly out of the room.

Hermione wavered over whether to pause or keep going. Draco twitched.

She swallowed hard and stopped, turning him back.

Lucius was staring across the room with the same starved expression he’d worn looking at Narcissa.

“Father. Mother,” Draco said, his voice low and forced.

Lucius rested a hand on the bars of the cage. “I was proud of you.”

Draco was silent for a moment.

“Right…” he said, the word barely more than a whisper.

Narcissa stared at Hermione. “Save him.”

Hermione nodded. “Yes.”

Lucius looked at Draco for a moment longer before his eyes dropped to Hermione. “Get him out.”

Hermione tightened her hold on Draco and walked quickly out the doors of the South Wing. Bobbin and several other elves were standing outside, holding the reins of the Granian. It was saddled and pawing the gravel impatiently, prancing as it stood waiting at the doors. The elves helped Draco up into the saddle, and Hermione mounted behind him. She looked down at Bobbin.

“Get all of the elves out of the manor. Don’t let any of the Death Eaters find you. Don’t ever tell anyone what happened.”

Bobbin nodded.

Hermione took the reins and drew a deep breath before snapping her wrists and kicking.

“Take us home!” She shouted the words.

The Granian bolted forward like a racehorse released from the gate. Its flight muscles tensed tightly as it galloped the length of the manor and took a powerful leap, wings extending. The smoky grey feathers beat surely against the wind, and they were airborne. The Granian circled, carrying them higher and higher as it gained altitude. The wind was whistling around them as they shot through the protective wards of the estate.

There was a roar from below that shook the air.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder as the roof of Malfoy Manor exploded in flames. An enormous fiendfyre dragon rose up, screaming with soul-rending rage as it tore the building apart.

Chapter 10

The air was cold and the wind constant as the Granian sped across England and over the North Sea.

The horse moved impossibly fast through the air, faster than a Thestral, faster than Hermione thought it was possible for any living animal to move.

She gripped Draco until her hands ached. "Don't die, Draco. Hold on."

She kept whispering diagnostic spells and verifying that the curse hadn’t evolved, that there wasn’t fluid accumulation, reassuring herself that his heart rate remained steady.

They were going so fast and so high that the ground was a blur. She refused to look. She couldn't falter.

"Don't die, Draco,” she said again as she buried her face against his back.

Her head was throbbing.

The horse kept flying, on and on.

Hour after hour.

The sensation of freefalling suddenly made Hermione’s stomach flip as the Granian hit the ground at a run. Its wings were held out wide, carrying it up off the ground in long flying leaps as it slowed down.

Hermione lifted her head and stared dazedly. It was night, and only a crescent moon illuminated the sky.

The horse had landed in an open field.

She squeezed Draco’s hand as the Granian cantered to a stop. “Draco… Draco, we’ve landed. I don’t know how to find the safe house.”

She shook him gently until she felt him stir. “Draco. I think we’re here.”

He lifted his head slowly.

“Nix...”

There was a pop, and a tiny and positively ancient-looking house-elf appeared.

“Master Draco, Nix did not expect you,” the elf said. Its voice was creaky with age.

Draco stared at him and finally nodded slowly. “Take the horse.” Hermione let the reins slip from her fingers. She started to shift to dismount, but her leg in the stirrup wouldn’t hold her. She started to topple off the horse.

Draco abruptly jerked from barely lucid to awake. His right hand shot out and caught her by the cloak.

“Nix!” Hermione felt herself caught magically, and Draco’s hand let go. She was levitated gently to

the ground and lay in the grass, too exhausted to move. She stared up at the sky. The stars were bright and glittering overhead.

A moment later Draco brought his leg over the saddle and slid off the Granian, dropping down heavily beside the horse. He patted its neck for a moment before turning and kneeling down next to Hermione. He was as pale as the moonlight, and his expression was dazed but worried as he stared down at her. He pulled the glove off with his teeth and pressed his hand against her cheek.

She forced herself to give him a wan smile. “We did it, Draco.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up, and his hand slipped down to take hers. She stood, slowly and unsteadily, and they leaned against each other as they walked forward. Draco stopped and extended his hand. There was a clicking sound, and a ray of pale candle light appeared as a door swung open.

They didn’t even bother to pull their cloaks off; they just collapsed into the bed and slept. Hermione gripped his hand tightly between both of hers. Draco’s chin brushed against her forehead, and she buried her face against his chest, breathing him in.

It was nearly evening the next day when she woke. Her headache was still a constant grinding pain in the back of her mind. She blinked it away, looking carefully around.

They were in a small A-frame cabin. It smelled of raw timber and was mostly unfurnished. A stove. The bed and a small table. A bright brass key hung from a hook on the wall. There were eyelet lace curtains hanging from the windows, and the sunlight streamed down over them where they lay curled up together on the bed.

There was no cold and sterile manor. No creeping sensation of dark magic in the walls and soil. No manacles. No compulsions.

They were safe. Free. Far away from the war.

She studied Draco, her heart in her throat, as she absorbed everything.

It was too good to be true. It had to be. Things in her life were never this beautiful.

She pulled a hand away from Draco in order to search the lining of her cloak for the unicorn wand. As her fingers closed around it, Draco shifted and she glanced over to find him staring at her. She gripped the wand tightly in her hand as she looked at him.

Her pulse was racing, and she could almost hear the blood roaring in her ears. It felt as though the wrong movement or sound might break everything apart. The warmth and safety would bleed away, and once again she’d find herself as a shadow in the dark, cold manor or swallowed by the darkness under Hogwarts.

“I feel like this is going to shatter somehow,” she finally said, reaching out and brushing her fingers through his hair, trying to make herself believe that he was truly there. That the warmth and light and feeling of safety were real.

He nodded slowly. As she studied him, she could see the tension around his eyes and in the way his jaw was set. She reached and unclasped his cloak, gently pushing it off his left shoulder so she could see his bandaged arm. “It’s hurting, isn’t it?”

He shook his head. “It’s fine.”

Her throat tightened. She sat up quickly, and the sunlit world swam in her vision as she blinked rapidly, drawing his unicorn wand from her cloak. “Don’t lie about it, I can’t care for you properly if you’re lying.”

She ignored her headache and pulled off her cloak and coat so that she could move her arms more easily.

There was a tray of food on a small table beside them. Draco sat up and speared a burnt sausage with a fork and began nibbling at it while Hermione was rapidly casting diagnostic spells on him. She checked his heart and other vital signs. She examined his blood readings. She cast a complex diagnostic on his left arm and carefully inspected every vein, artery, and major nerve. She spent several minutes siphoning away accumulating fluid.

She reached out and grasped the strap of her satchel, dragging it over before she remembered she could use summoning spells. She rummaged through its contents until she found all the potions she needed.

She unstoppered and held a potion out towards him. “This is antivenin that counteracts the blood thinning. I hope it’s not a long-term effect, but in case, you should take this every twelve hours.” While he was swallowing it, she looked out the window, staring at the empty field.

Her head was throbbing, and her stomach was beginning to twist and knot itself until she thought she might be sick. She tore her eyes away from the window and pulled a sling out of the satchel. She laid it onto her lap and carefully applied a variety of cushioning charms before turning to Draco who had given up on the sausage.

She slipped his cloak and robes off both shoulders and helped him put on the sling, anchoring it safely and securely against his torso. “I’m going to make you a prosthetic,” she said in a bright voice as she buckled one of the clasps. “I have some ideas already. I did a little bit of research before. Since it’s your arm and hand, I thought—maybe wand core in the forearm—you’d be able cast wandless magic with it, if I can figure it out.”

She quickly pulled out several vials of pain relief and unstoppered one for Draco. While he took it, she looked out the window again.

“You should eat,” he said. “One of the sausages is not entirely charred. There are also—peas, I believe.”

Hermione shook her head without looking away from the window. “I’m really not hungry.”

She took an empty vial from him and unstoppered the next potion to hand over before peering out the window again. There were meadows of wild grass dotted with wildflowers as far as she could see. The wand handle was smooth and warm under her fingertips.

She gripped it until the wood bit into the bones in her hand.

“Granger, are you alright?” She looked over sharply. “Of course. I’m fine. I’m just not hungry.”

She turned back to the window, shifting herself to the foot of the bed and pushing the curtains aside so she could see their surroundings more clearly.

There was a long, heavy silence that she ignored until she felt she might break under it. She turned and found Draco staring at her intently.

She licked her lips and drew her wand closer. “What—what kind of protection does this safe house have? I haven’t—I haven’t dueled since I was captured—I should—” her chest was starting to tighten painfully. “I should have practiced. I didn’t think about—”

She drew a stuttering breath and looked away again. Her vision was beginning to swim, and her heart was pounding painfully against her ribs.

She needed to stay calm. Occlude everything and focus. She had a job. How she felt didn’t matter. She had a job.

“Granger,” Draco reached out and rested his hand on her wand, “the safe house is secure, and there’s a portkey there on the wall.” He gestured towards the brass key. “If we touch it, we’ll travel halfway around the world. You don’t need to worry.”

Her throat tightened, and her heart started racing. “What if someone finds us, Draco? What if it didn’t work, and they’re already looking for you, but we don’t know? I promised I’d take care of you. You’re hurt—you were already hurt and I cut off your arm—” her voice fractured, and she gripped her wand more tightly. “What if someone finds us? It’s going to fall apart. It always—falls apart.” She started breathing rapidly and pressed her hand against her sternum, still gripping the wand tightly.

She couldn’t panic.

She couldn’t panic. She needed to—there were protective wards she should add. She couldn’t use any Dark Magic, it could hurt the baby.

But if someone came, and she had to choose—

Her lungs started burning.

“Hermione—Hermione, you have to breathe.” Draco had moved down the bed and was beside her, firmly pulling her wand out of her hand. Having the wand taken away made her feel hysterical. She grasped at it.

“Don’t—don’t take it from me!” She felt as though she were being strangled.

He set it on the table where it was still within her reach and pressed his hand against her face, coaxing her to look at him. He gently pulled her closer until her forehead rested against his while she kept gasping and struggling to breathe.

“Come on, you’ve made it so far, don’t panic. Protecting me is not your job. The safe house has protective spells, and we won’t be here long. I’m not an entirely abysmal duelist with my right hand.”

She forced herself to take a deep breath. He pressed his lips against her forehead. “That’s it. Just breathe. You got us here. You promised you’d stop and recover once we escaped, remember? I’m not the one ignoring a brain injury. You’ve done your part.”

She gripped his wrist with a shaking hand. “Draco—something’s going to go wrong. It always goes

wrong. It’s always when we’re so close that it all goes wrong.”

“I know,” he said, tangling his hand in her hair and pulling her closer, “but it’s not all resting on you. I trusted you, and you got us here. It’s your turn to trust me. We’re safe here, Hermione. You’re allowed to feel safe now.”

She shook her head. Her sternum felt as though it were fracturing. “I can’t. I don’t think I know how to.”

Her skin was painfully cold, and her whole body started shaking uncontrollably.

Draco sighed and pulled her closer. “There aren’t wards here like the ones I had on your room. You’re probably used to them being there in order to feel calm now.”

She sat still for a moment absorbing it before making a choking sound as she burst into tears. It as like breaking a dam. Once she started, she couldn’t stop, she kept crying and crying and crying against Draco’s shoulder. She felt as though she were mourning over her entire life. He didn’t try to make her stop, he just let her cry until her sobbing slowly eased and she slumped against him, feeling hollow. It was as though she’d stripped her emotions out by the roots and all that was left was a shell. Her chest kept hitching as she leaned against him. Her head felt light but throbbed as though there were a gong inside it, vibrating and resounding painfully through her skull.

When she was breathing evenly again, Draco reached into his robes and extracted a Dreamless Sleep potion from an inner pocket. “It’s your turn to rest, Granger. Take it.”

She drew back, shaking her head as she looked back at the window, her fingers inching towards her wand. “Draco, if something goes wrong—”

His expression was cold granite. “I’ll deal with it. Go to sleep.”

“But if—”

“Granger, if it were me, you would have poured it down my throat without asking.”

Her mouth twitched as she took the vial. She cast one last glance out the window as she pulled out the stopper and swallowed it.

Her heart was still pounding, but she could feel his hand, warm on her shoulder, as she slumped down. Everything faded away.

She woke in the middle of the night, Draco was standing in front of the window. The moonlight caught in his hair and cast his silhouette in silver. He was staring out across the field, his wand dangling from his fingertips.

She sat up, and he turned to look at her.

She looked past him, reaching for her wand. “Is everything—?” “Everything is fine.” He stepped away from the window, pausing for a moment to find a pocket for his wand that he could access. He slipped it into an inner pocket and ran his hand down his robes as though he were wiping something off before awkwardly shrugging them from his shoulders. He sat down on the edge of the bed beside her.

Her head felt heavy, but the pain had shifted further back in her mind. He leaned back against the

headboard. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat and feeling his fingers trace patterns and protective runes along her arm.

When she opened her eyes the next morning, the world was golden. Sunlight was streaming through the window, warming the bedding. Draco was asleep beside her. Her headache had finally eased to a faint throbbing. She rolled onto her stomach and stretched, sliding her hands across the sheets, and buried her face in a pillow, luxuriating in the heat and the sound of birds singing outside.

She was free. Somewhere with sunshine and magic and someone who wouldn't hurt her. She kept her eyes closed and tried to drown herself in the feeling of it. She lay on her stomach only a moment before her bladder was prodded sharply from within by an indignant foot.

She curled onto her side, looking at Draco.

His hair had fallen across his face. It was as though she were in a dream.

She reached out tentatively and used her fingertips to catch up the platinum strands and brush them away. She wanted to memorise him all over again. In the golden light, he no longer looked like something carved out of a war. His features were softer when his expression was relaxed. She trailed her eyes along the arch of his cheekbones, his lips, the precise lines of his jaw, and his pale throat disappearing into the shadows of his clothing.

He could have been a painting.

She wanted to hold her breath and make the moment last forever.

She slipped her fingers along the shell of his ear to brush away his hair. His eyes opened, grey as a storm. She watched the light fill them as he looked at her.

The way he stared at her made the rest of the world fade away. His gaze was as possessive and ravenous as she felt.

She shifted closer and kissed him. His lips moved against hers, and his hand slid up her throat.

After a minute, she drew back wistfully. "I need to check your arm."

He sighed but sat up without complaint when she started casting spells, verifying that everything was still healing properly. She rebandaged his arm as she finished. When she was putting his sling back on, her fingertips brushed against the pale skin of his throat. They lingered.

She looked up at his face and found that his eyes were dark and intent as he stared back at her. He reached out slowly with his hand and laced his fingers gently through her hair. Her breath caught, and her pulse quickened.

His touch was safety. Home.

"I love you," he said after a moment. Hermione's lips curved slowly in a faint smile. "I love you too."

He ran his fingers slowly through her hair. "I never imagined I'd say that to you without a Dark Mark branded into me."

Hermione's jaw trembled.

She lifted her hand to his face, tracing lightly along his jaw, feeling the faint stubble under her fingertips. “The universe finally gave us something.” He gave a low laugh, and his fingers tangled in her hair tightened possessively.

She shifted closer and leaned forward until their lips were barely touching. “I love you. As long as there is anything of me that exists, I will love you. Always,” she whispered against his mouth.

He closed the infinitesimal space between them.

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. His hand left her hair and gripped her waist, pulling her closer until their bodies were pressed together.

Mine. Mine. Mine. She felt ravenous for him. She wanted to hoard him away inside her heart and bury him there. Time always ran out for them. Things always fell apart, and what they’d taken was all they’d had. They’d survived on moments they stole during the war.

She felt as though she had starved to death from wanting him.

She wasn’t going to let him go.

She wasn’t going to let things fall apart this time. Her heart started pounding painfully. I can’t lose him. I can’t lose him.

Her throat and chest began to tighten. She squeezed her eyes closed and shoved her terror back, as far as she could, trying to wall it away before it swallowed her whole.

She wasn’t going to panic. She forced herself to breathe, a ragged gasp against his lips.

She ran her fingers along his throat and gripped his shoulders as she forced herself to occlude everything and kept kissing him. Then she drew her lips away so she could stare at him. Her hand dropped down to grip his.

“I’m going to take care of you.” She held his hand tighter and pressed it against her chest. “I’m yours, as long as you want me.”

His hand slid up to cradle her face. He stared at her, his silver eyes intent. “Always. As long as I live.”

She poured herself into him until there wasn’t space in her mind for anything else. She kissed him again until she was breathless.

She could kiss him without it meaning goodbye, without wondering if she’d ever see him again. She could be with him just because she could, because he was hers.

“I love you,” she kept saying against his lips. “I love you. I will always love you.”

She could say it as many times as she wanted. Every day for the rest of her life. She could say it and say it.

She gave a low sob against his lips. Draco drew back, studying her, his expression tensed.

She gripped his shoulders more tightly as she met his eyes. “I’m happy. I didn’t think I was ever going to be happy again, but I think this is what being happy feels like. We survived, Draco. I saved you. I didn’t think we would, but we survived.”

His mouth curved into a slow smile.

They made love. Slowly. Using all the time they had.

Hermione sat astride him, setting the pace, watching him. The sun was shining outside, and she could feel it on her skin as she looked down and entwined their fingers, canting her hips against his. She could see the light catch in his hair. His eyes shone like molten silver.

Their world was warm.

It grew warmer when he sat up, pulling her hips flush against his as he kissed her. His hand trailed along her spine, gripping her. She could feel the burn of him in her soul. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, tracing her fingers along his runes as they moved together.

“We should take the portkey soon,” he said when they were lying in bed together afterwards. “I’m certain Nix’s food qualifies as a health hazard. I’m realising now that basic cooking spells are something I never bothered to learn.”

Hermione glanced over, and her eyes landed on several burnt slices of toast, spread over-generously with preserve. Draco picked up the least burnt slice and offered it to her.

“He’s a stable elf. I don’t think he’s cooked before in his life.”

Hermione nibbled hesitantly on a corner and discovered that the toast was caraway rye bread which clashed intensely with the strawberry preserve.

She choked, and Draco gave her an apologetic look.

He looked around the room. “This was just temporary safe house. I didn’t do much more than ward it.” He turned back to look at her. “Are you able to portkey?”

Her stomach plummeted, and her hands crept protectively down to her stomach. Draco’s eyes followed them.

“I don’t know.” She looked down at the swell of her stomach, running her hands nervously over it. “Last time—I didn’t take a Calming Draught beforehand. I didn’t expect it. It was—it was hard to handle.”

Draco’s expression tensed, and something indecipherable flickered in his eyes.

She forced herself to smile. “But if we do things properly—if I’m ready for it, and it’s just the once—I think it could be alright.” He was silent for several seconds. “We don’t have to go. We could stay here. I’ll let Ginny know you can’t safely travel.”

She looked down at her stomach again. “It’s not very safe here though, is it? We’re still in Europe. Denmark has a treaty with Voldemort; the terms of the armistice require them to turn fugitives over. Even if they didn’t, they’d never protect you.” She drew a deep breath and looked up. “It’ll be fine. Maybe—just a day or so longer, then we’ll go.”

Draco’s expression had closed; he stared at her stomach for a moment before nodding.

She got up and took a shower. She still had dust in her hair from the explosion in the manor, and the curls were badly tangled. She spent ten minutes hand-detangling them before she remembered she

had a wand again. She dried it and braided it loosely in a long plait. By the time she was tying it off, her headache had come back. It bore through the back of her skull until she could barely keep standing. She pulled her shirt and knickers back on, downed a nutrition potion, and then curled around her stomach in a miserable heap in the bed, falling asleep again.

When she woke the next morning, there was a brain diagnostic hanging over her head. Draco was staring at it with a drawn expression as he manipulated the reading.

It felt like being dunked into cold water. The warmth vanished, and she lay frozen for a moment, staring at all the scarlet, thread-like fractals branching through her brain. She reached up and shoved his wand away. The diagnostic disappeared.

She looked away towards the window.

There was a long silence.

“Hermione, what happened? What did he do to you? Are you going to tell me?”

She was quiet for several minutes, swallowing hard before she finally spoke.

“I’m not actually sure. He didn’t know how to use legilimency, so he just—crushed things that were in the way. Even now that I have my occlumency back—there are certain spots in my memories that I can’t—can’t reach them anymore. It—feels like a building where parts have collapsed. I feel like if I go near or disturb it—more might fall apart.”

She pressed her lips together. “Some of the things I started to remember again—I don’t know if I’ll still remember them after a while. Every time I wake up, they feel like they’ve faded. The details are all disappearing.”

Draco’s fingers brushed lightly against her cheek. “What—” his voice was tense, “what do you not remember? What’s fading?”

Hermione was silent. “All the times you told me about your mother. There are gaps in those memories now.”

Draco gave a heavy sigh of relief. “That’s fine. That’s fine. You don’t need to remember that.” Hermione just stared out the window and swallowed again. “It’s not fine. Those were important. They were important to me, that you told me, that I understood what happened to you. I’m afraid my memory is going to fall apart someday. Like there are cracks all over now, and someday something will push it wrong, and it will all break. What if I forget you again?” She couldn’t hide her rising panic. “All that time in the manor, I felt like my heart had been torn out of my chest. You were right there—and I didn’t know I was looking for you.”

The warmth and tranquility of the cabin suddenly felt mocking. Like it was all a daydream she was clinging to. He turned her face so that their eyes met. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

She nodded, but her mouth twisted. “I know. I know that rationally. I just—” her eyes dropped as her voice started shaking. “I don’t know how to believe it. As soon as I start thinking, my heart starts pounding, and I can’t breathe. Even when I try to occlude, it’s like my body won’t stop panicking. I should be relieved, but I’m just as terrified that I’ll lose you as I was in the manor. I feel like I’m still holding on with my fingertips. Every second feels only moments away from everything falling apart and turning back into a nightmare.”

She drew a ragged breath and sat up, pressing her hand against her sternum as she made herself breathe slowly. She stared down at her wrists. “I—I thought that everything would be fixed once my manacles were off and we escaped. I thought I’d be better—the way I used to be...”

Her voice faded away.

“You must know you’re reaching the point where the damage is becoming irreversible.”

She sat frozen as she recalled it.

It had always been an illusion to think her manacles were the key to everything. That some previous version of Hermione Granger was merely lying in wait, ready to step forward the moment her magic was unlocked and her occlumency returned.

The realisation felt like reaching out and touching the surface of a lake, watching the golden sunlit reflection distort and ripple away, revealing all the darkness that still lurked beneath. That showed what was really there.

Darkness gets into your soul.

Mind or body, Dark Magic extracts a price.

She’d known she’d pay for it all eventually.

Draco picked up her hand, running his thumb over her bared wrists. “It’s all new. Give it time.”

She stared at him and nodded wistfully. As she studied him, she realised that there was a pained tension in his face. She shoved the heaviness in her chest back from her awareness, walling it away, and sat up, reaching for her wand.

She pulled her satchel opened and reached for one of the pain potions. Her hand froze as she realised her potion inventory looked wrong. She counted vials and found that she was a half-dozen Blood-Replenishing Potions short. She stared for several seconds before summoning Draco’s robes from where they were hung over the foot of the bed and burying her face in them.

They smelled of Dark Magic.

As she sat absorbing it, she realised she’d felt dramatically calmer ever since he’d dosed her with Dreamless Sleep Draught.

She looked over at Draco, anger flaring through her like an explosion. “You shouldn’t use blood magic. Your blood is thin now. You could bleed to death if you’re not careful. There’s no reason to add so many enchantments to a safe house we’re not even staying in for long. It was idiotic.” Draco just stared at her through hooded eyes as she started rapidly casting spells on him.

“It helped you feel better.”

She glared at him. “Injuring and endangering yourself so I’ll feel better doesn’t make me feel better.”

He didn’t say anything else while she checked him over and dosed him with several potions. She removed the bandages on his arm in order to change them and check how his arm was healing. The skin was knitting together smoothly, and she massaged it gently with Essence of Dittany.

She took his hand in hers and started treating his tremors for several minutes in silence.

“Don’t hurt yourself for me, Draco,” she finally said in stiff voice. “Stop hurting yourself. I am so tired of that being the way we care for each other. You have no idea how much I hate it when you hurt yourself because of me. You hate it when I’m hurt. It’s the same for me with you.”

He still didn’t say anything. He didn’t look penitent either.

While she was working on his hand, a tray with more inedible food appeared. They both took nutritional potions instead. Hermione’s stock of them was beginning to run low.

She took a careful inventory of everything she had left, mentally calculating how many more days they could stay if they chose to.

“I could brew more if we want to stay longer,” she said, looking up at Draco.

“Whatever you want.” He smiled at her, but he’d dressed and put on his cloak while she was taking inventory. As she was staring at him, she noticed his eyes flicker over towards the window subtly.

“We should go.” She pulled the satchel onto her shoulder and shoved the rest of their belongings into it. “I’m sure—I’m sure it will be alright. It’ll just be once.”

She pulled out a vial of Calming Draught and stared at it for several seconds before taking it. She entwined her fingers tightly with Draco’s and drew a deep breath, forcing herself to occlude the anxiety rushing through her like a tidal wave before the potion activated.

She squeezed Draco’s hand, running her thumb over his knuckles and stopping at the ring he wore. She looked up at him and gave a tentative smile before she reached out, grasping the brass key hanging on the wall.

There was a sharp tug behind her navel. She was snatched up, pulling Draco with her.

She tried to stay on her feet as she landed, but she stumbled forward and collapsed, retching. She wrenched her hand from Draco’s and pressed the heel of her hand against her stomach as it contracted taut.

“Oh god,” she groaned as she pushed herself up and struggled to breathe.

She felt Draco’s hand on the small of her back as she squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to inhale slowly. Slowly. The rigidity in her abdomen gradually faded.

She could smell earth and bracken. She opened her eyes and found that they were kneeling in a forest. “Are we there?”

There was a sliding sound and a crack as wood struck wood. Hermione looked over her shoulder. There was a large wooden house behind them.

Ginny stood in the doorway, staring at them, a wand gripped in her hand.

Chapter 11

“Hermione!” Ginny gasped the name, and stumbled down several steps, dragging Hermione into her arms and hugging her ferociously. “Oh my god. Oh my god. Hermione.”

Ginny’s hands were running over Hermione, touching her face and shoulders as though she couldn’t believe Hermione was real.

Hermione felt almost disbelieving as she stared at Ginny.

Ginny looked the same. As though the last two years had forgotten her. Her startlingly red hair, her eyes, and familiar smile veiled in tears as she knelt, sobbing and hugging Hermione. The jagged scar still ran down the side of her face.

Hermione started to cry as her hands rose up and gripped Ginny’s shoulders. “Ginny—Oh Ginny.”

They knelt on the ground, clinging to each other and sobbing for several minutes.

Ginny sat back, smearing away her tears as she studied Hermione. “I thought I was never going to see anyone again. Look at you. Oh god, you’re so thin.”

Ginny’s eyes ran down Hermione’s body, stopping at her stomach, and she stared frozen for a moment.

The joyful relief vanished from Ginny’s face. She looked as though she’d been gutted. She held Hermione’s shoulders and stared down. “Oh, oh god, I’m so sorry. I’m so so—sorry.”

Ginny’s head whipped up, and she stared at Draco with undisguised loathing. “Get away from her. You have no right to ever touch her—”

She lunged at Draco as though she intended to strangle him.

Hermione caught hold of Ginny’s shoulders to stop her. “Ginny.”

“Let go of me!” Ginny tried to pull Hermione’s hands off. “He said he cared about you! He kept coming here, saying it was all for you, and then”—Ginny’s voice was shaking with devastated rage—“he *raped* you until you were pregnant!”

Hermione’s throat tightened, and she inserted herself protectively in front of Draco. “Ginny —he didn’t have any choice. Don’t hurt him.”

Ginny glared past Hermione at Draco but stopped lunging. Her hand rose up, and she gripped Hermione’s wrist. Hermione heard Draco sigh. “It’s fine, Granger. Go inside and rest. I need to check the wards.”

She felt him stand. Before Hermione could get up, Ginny shot to her feet and slapped Draco sharply across the face. Draco didn’t flinch, and Ginny slapped him violently again.

“You should be dead,” Ginny said coldly. “You don’t deserve to breathe near her. Nothing you ever do will make up for what you’ve done.”

“Ginny, stop it!” Hermione forced herself to her feet. “Shut up. Shut up. I’m the one who saved him.

I brought him here. He never asked or expected to survive. If you want to be angry with someone about that, it should be me."

She gripped Draco's wrist and stepped protectively closer to him. "Leave him alone. I mean it. If you ever lay a hand on him again—"

Ginny's expression rippled as she raised her hands in surrender. "Fine," she said in a forced voice, her expression slowly becoming drawn as she looked at Hermione and Draco.

Hermione stared at Ginny for a moment longer before turning to Draco.

His expression was closed. There was a scarlet handprint across each of his cheeks. Hermione drew her wand and muttered a spell to heal it and stroked along his cheekbone as the markings slowly faded.

"It's fine, Granger," he said. "You should go inside."

Hermione edged closer to him. "I'll come with you. You can—show me where we are."

He shook his head. "I need to apparate. Go inside. You should see the house," his mouth curved into a faint smile. "I think you'll like it. I'll be back in half an hour."

Hermione gave a reluctant nod but didn't let go of him.

"Come on." Draco lead her out of the bracken they'd landed in and over to a stone-set footpath.

They were in a forest. There were towering trees overhead, and the house was a large, sleek, architecturally Asian-style building covered in latticed windows.

They ascended several large stone steps up to the house. There was an unrailed wooden veranda several feet above ground that seemed to wrap around the entire house. As they stepped onto the veranda, Ginny stepped past Draco and Hermione and slid a latticed wooden doorway open. The floor was smooth, polished wood, and they entered into a narrow hall. There was light filtering through the walls.

Hermione stepped inside, but Draco stopped at the doorway and pulled his wand out, inspecting and testing several wards set inside the walls of the building. After several minutes, he flicked his wand and looked up at Hermione and Ginny, who were both watching him in silence. "Weasley, she's tired. Keep her calm, make sure she rests. I'll be back in half an hour." His eyes locked on Hermione. "You'll be alright with Ginny?"

Hermione gave him a nervous smile and nodded.

He stared at her a moment longer and vanished without a sound.

Hermione studied the empty space for several seconds before hesitantly turning to look at Ginny.

The reunion felt more heavily-tinged with pain than she'd expected. Of course it wouldn't be simple, but somehow she hadn't expected it to be so immediately complicated. She hadn't thought she would feel obliged to legitimise something as intensely personal as her relationship with Draco.

"You shouldn't have hit him."

Ginny stared at her, disappointed resignation written across her face. "You could do so much better

than him, Hermione."

Hermione scoffed, her stomach twisting. "I don't really care what you think. He saved your life. I would never have been able to save you on my own."

Hermione could see a dozen objections in Ginny's expression, but she sighed and closed her eyes.

"Right." Ginny slid the door shut. "If that's what you want, I won't say anything else. I just—Hermione—" her voice caught, and then she hesitated for a moment. "Never mind."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

Hermione looked up and down the hallway slowly. "Where are we?"

Ginny looked around with her. "We're at the top of the house. Or—do you mean where is the house?" She shrugged a shoulder and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I don't actually know. Malfoy says we're somewhere in East Asia, but that could be a total lie. We're on an island— somewhere. It takes about half a day to walk across it. I've never left. I'm not even sure how to leave it. The elves go for supplies every few months, but they don't take orders from me."

The light coming through the walls shifted, and Hermione realised she could see the shadows of the trees through the walls. She reached out and touched a latticed wall and found the lattice was set with paper.

"It takes a while to get used to," Ginny said as she watched Hermione. "Most of the walls slide, so you can open the house and rooms up so that it's open, or section them off. Malfoy —he said you didn't like it if it's too open, so I had the elves put all the walls up."

Ginny slid open a second set of wooden doors facing the doors they had entered through. It revealed a room with a large circular window that looked over treetops and the ocean beyond. The furniture reminded Hermione of Malfoy Manor, spindly Victorian chairs and chaises.

Hermione's hand slid slowly to her pocket, and she gripped her wand tightly as she stared at the window.

She forced herself to take a few hesitant steps forward and then froze, trying to absorb it. She was certain the building was already enchanted to be calming or Draco wouldn't have left so quickly. Still, she wanted Draco to be there, beside her, where she knew he was safe.

They were never going back.

He would never go back.

She squeezed her eyes shut and reassured herself of it.

If she could see him, she'd feel more convinced of it. She'd feel more certain that it wasn't a beautiful dream that would turn to dust the moment she really let herself believe it.

She should be with Draco. He might use blood magic again. She didn't know if he had any Blood-Replenishing Potion with him.

Instead she was with Ginny, whose brown eyes were conflicted and sad as she watched Hermione stand motionless in the doorway. Hermione pressed her lips together and made herself refocus,

trying to think of something to say. “Where’s James? It’s—James, right?”

Ginny gave a hesitant smile. “Yes. James. He’s napping. He sleeps a few hours every afternoon. I’d take you to see him, but he’s a nightmare about sleeping and if he wakes up, it’ll be a terrible introduction.” Ginny reached out slowly and touched Hermione’s arm. “Let’s go to your room. You’re so thin. You should eat something and then lie down.”

Hermione nodded slowly and looked away from the open sea.

“The house sprawls.” Ginny slipped a hand into Hermione’s and squeezed it. “It’s not magical aside from the protection, so you don’t have to worry about the hallways rearranging themselves or anything like that. There’s a massive web of protective magic here though. I thought Grimmauld Place had a lot of wards, but this place leaves Grimmauld in the dust as far as paranoia goes. Malfoy is absolute nut about it. Every time he came, he’d spend at least an hour adding more wards.”

The house was fitted against a large forested hill. The portkey had dropped them near the top of the hill, and the rest of the house flowed in a vague U-shape, down over boulders and around the trees, as though it had been fitted there like a puzzle piece.

It wasn’t one building, but dozens that were joined by the roofs and bridges that connected to the veranda of each building. There was a large, lush garden in the centre.

Ginny pointed to things along the way. “That’s my vegetable garden over there,” Ginny said, “it gets the best sunlight. It used to have roses, but I was dying of boredom and the elves moved them so that I could have a patch with something to do. I’m—I’ve actually become quite a cook, like Mum. Harry used to cook too. He’d bring me breakfast sometimes, you know...” Ginny’s voice faded away, and she stood at the top of a moon bridge staircase that overlooked a pond with large koi fish swimming in it. “God—I would give anything to have a picture.”

She looked over at Hermione and gave a wistful smile. “It’s so weird finally having someone to talk to who isn’t a house-elf. Anyway, your rooms are all here, on this side of the house, and James and I are just across the garden, in those rooms.” Ginny pointed to the left. She slid two doors apart and stepped back.

It opened into a room about the size of Hermione’s bedroom at the manor. It was crammed to the ceiling with walls of books. A wing-backed chair was in one corner, and a secretary desk was in another. There were thousands of books. The shelves were all full despite the obvious use of expansion charms, and there were boxes and stacks of more books covering most of the floor.

Hermione stepped through the doorway and turned around, taking it all in.

“Malfoy brought all this,” Ginny said from behind her. “I guess that’s probably obvious.”

There were doors on three of the walls. Hermione slid one open and peered through to find a potion and alchemy lab, stocked with cauldrons, jars and jars of materials, and foraging baskets that hung from hooks overhead. Her fingers twitched against the wooden door, and her throat tightened as she slid it closed.

“He’d visit, verify James and I weren’t dead, add wards, and then spend most of his time here. He came a lot—back at the beginning, but then less as time went on. He’d bring the weirdest stuff sometimes, and always excused it saying you’d need things to keep you occupied. The gardening

stuff was actually for you too. I hope you don't mind that I stole it."

Hermione shook her head as she slid the other set of doors open and found a sitting room with more shelves filled with books.

There were curtained windows. Hermione slowly brushed one aside and was relieved not to find another cliffside ocean view. The window looked into a bamboo grove.

Hermione stared for a few moments before dropping the curtain down again.

There was another large set of doors on the far side of the sitting room. The wall and doors were painted with a forest shrouded in mist.

Hermione slid the doors apart and found a bedroom. The room was dark, with curtains hanging down most of the walls. There was a low dresser and mirror. Hermione caught sight of her reflection and discovered she looked like a startled deer.

Too thin. Still wearing the same clothes she'd worn cutting off Draco's arm and escaping.

She'd been so desperate to tear off her surrogate uniform, but as she looked at her reflection she felt an equal desire to burn the riding clothes. There had to be fresh clothes here. Something else to wear. Something that wasn't drenched in a nightmare.

She looked at the dresser and then glanced over towards Ginny.

Ginny's expression was still tense, her fingers had wandered up and were toying with the tips of her hair. She glanced around the rooms, appearing uncomfortable standing in them. "I didn't know if you'd want to be here, or over with me and James. You don't need to be here at all. I just wanted to make sure you know you'll have space and privacy if you want it. I—" Ginny's voice broke off, and she took a deep breath. "I'm so glad you're finally here."

Hermione nodded slowly. She glanced around the room. "No. This is nice. I'm still—getting used to things. It's been so long since—" she swallowed and ran her fingers across the linen duvet on the bed, "I think some space will be best."

Ginny nodded, but her eyes grew pained. "You'll come be with us sometimes though—won't you? James has never seen any other humans but me and Malfoy. I've told him so many stories about you and Harry and Ron—"

"Of course. I just mean—" Hermione found herself at a loss for how to explain it to Ginny. "None of this seems real yet. What we did—" her chest tightened. "It was such a gamble. We still don't know if it worked all the way."

She felt for her wand. Fifteen more minutes and Draco would be back.

Ginny cocked her head to the side. "I was wondering about that? How exactly was it supposed to work? Malfoy just said you were attempting an escape by cutting his Dark Mark off and using Lucius. But—Malfoy will go back eventually, because he made an unbreakable vow to defeat Voldemort, right?"

Hermione tensed so rigidly she thought her spine might snap. "No. He can't go back. He's never going to go back. He's going to stay here now, with me," Hermione said in a flat voice.

Ginny's expression grew unreservedly dismayed for a split-second before she masked it.

Hermione's throat grew tight as she coldly stared at Ginny. "His vow was to do his best to aid the Order in defeating Voldemort. He's done his best. He's done enough. Voldemort's tortured him so much he can hardly duel now. There's—there's nothing else he can do."

She gripped the back of a chair until her knuckles showed white. "He's done his best," she said again. "He has. He's done everything he could. Anything else—" her throat caught. "He's fulfilled his Vow. So—what we did was stage his death. After I got Draco's Dark Mark off, Lucius burned down the manor with fiendfyre. We're hoping everyone will assume Draco and I both died in the fire. Europe is unstable. If everyone thinks the High Reeve died, the International Confederation may finally decide to intervene." There was a brief silence.

"But… Voldemort won't be dead," Ginny said slowly. Gently. As though she were breaking the news to Hermione.

Hermione felt heat flare in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to explode.

"No." Hermione's voice was so tight it was vibrating. "But he doesn't need to be killed— defeated should be enough. He can die on his own. Or someone else can actually do something for change." She drew a sharp, ragged breath and forced herself to continue. "If Draco were able to kill him before the International Confederation steps in, the Dark Marks would disappear. None of the Resistance members who are surrogates or imprisoned would be able to get their manacles off unless they find a way of forging Voldemort's magical signature."

There was a burning sensation bleeding down her trapezius muscles. She slid a hand into her pocket and gripped her wand. Draco's old wand.

"Draco isn't in any condition or position to do more. He's done his best. It's someone else's turn to do something. Losing the High Reeve is one of the most detrimental blows Voldemort could take. If the International Confederation think Draco's a threat they may delay intervention. Appearing to have died is the best thing he can do."

"And that—works with the Vow?"

Hermione nodded jerkily, and her fingers spasmed around her wand. "I think it does. I created the Vow with him. It's defined by my intent, and it was always intended to save him, so it should be enough. And if it didn't work—" her voice caught as her heart started pounding. "If it didn't—I'll—I'll—"

Her voice stopped as her chest contracted so painfully it felt as though her sternum were being cracked in half. Her eyes widened.

Her jaw started trembling. "I'll—"

Her voice faded.

She drew a shallow breath.

"I'll…" Ginny stared at her in bewilderment and then horrified understanding dawned on her face. She rapidly crossed the room and touched Hermione on the shoulder. "Hermione? Hermione, oh god. That was a stupid question to ask. Come on, breathe. I shouldn't have asked. Please breathe.

What do I do? What helps? I have Draught of Peace."

Don't panic.

Don't panic. Hermione shook her head at Ginny and willed herself to keep breathing.

Ginny guided her to a chaise and wrapped her arms tightly around Hermione's shoulders. "You're safe here. You're safe. You don't need to panic. Can you use occlumency? You have your magic now, does occlumency help?"

Hermione nodded and tried to box her panic back in, but it was like trying to grasp dozens of eels as they slipped away into other parts of her mind.

She squeezed her eyes shut and narrowed her focus down to a single point.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Don't have a seizure. You can't have a seizure.

"Call Draco," she forced out as she made herself take a painful, gasping breath.

" How should I—oh right. *Expecto Patronum!"*

Hermione opened her eyes briefly to see Ginny's silver mare appear.

"Go find Malfoy. Tell him Hermione's having a panic attack."

The mare raced off, and Ginny turned back to Hermione.

"Oh Hermione, you're alright. You've been so brave. You made it all the way here. You're safe now. I'm sure everything worked out. No one is going to go back. You and Malfoy are both safe here. You made it here. You're safe. You just have to breathe."

Hermione kept forcing herself to inhale, drawing ragged, gasping breaths until suddenly her face was buried in fabric that smelled like the forest.

She clung to Draco and felt his hand running over her hair and down along her back.

"Hermione—come on, breathe for me," he said gently as he pulled her against his chest and held her tightly. Then his tone sharpened into a knife's edge. "What did you do? I told you to keep her calm."

"I'm sorry—I didn't know—"

Hermione tangled her fingers in Draco's robes and lifted her head, pulling him closer and staring into his eyes. "Draco—Draco—if it didn't work—if you're still not free of your Unbreakable Vow—I'll—I promised—"

"If it doesn't work," he cut her off, "I'll be with you until the end. Which is all I ever wanted."

She shook her head violently and held his face. "No—No. I could still save you. I could go —"
"You will not go anywhere. You're done," he said, and his eyes turned to steel. "You'll stay here and take care of our daughter like you promised you would. That was your deal two years ago. I saved Ginny for you, and you gave your word you'd stop. Whatever I wanted. You promised you'd leave and never go back. You took extremely long detour, but I'm holding you to that promise now."

She shook her head again. “Draco—”

He gave a sharp sigh and his expression shifted from unrelenting to pleading. He pressed his hand against her jaw. “It’s not your job to keep breaking yourself to pieces to save everyone. Have you seen yourself, Granger? There’s hardly anything left of you.” His eyes were wide as he stared intently at her. “Living is not worth it to me if you’re the one who keeps paying the price for it.”

Her mouth twisted. “But—I need you, Draco—I can’t—” Her voice was shaking.

He pressed his forehead against hers, his hand cradling the nape of her neck. “And I need you too.”

She gave a broken sob and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“If it didn’t work, we’ll figure something else out,” he said in a low voice, his mouth near her ear. “But you will not, under any circumstances, go on another suicide mission in an attempt to save me. Come on, breathe slowly. I’m not dead, I’m right here with you. You're safe.”

Hermione gave a shuddering gasp. “What if it went wrong? What will we do?”

He brushed his thumb along her cheek. “We’ll figure it out.”

“You can’t die. Don’t die, Draco.” She kept saying it over and over under her breath.

“Do you need me to do anything?” Ginny was hovering beside them. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know I’d upset her.”

“She needs to eat. She’s barely eaten in days. *That* would be useful.” Draco’s voice was icy.

“Oh god, she didn’t mention—I’ll go get food now.”

There was a sliding sound and then a sharp click as Ginny left.

Hermione sat, holding Draco tightly for several more minutes as her heart slowly stopped pounding. “Sorry. I was alright, and then—”

“It’s fine.” He stroked her hair. “I was heading back anyway. I should have stayed. I thought you and Ginny would get along better without me.”

Hermione gave a wistful smile. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen anyone I knew. I forgot— how much there is.” Draco gave a sharp sigh and his fingers twitched. “You don’t have to see her. She can stay in her own part of the house.”

“No.” She shook her head and straightened in order to look at him. “I want to see her. I just— I thought it would be simpler. I suppose nothing is ever simple for us. She was curious about how we escaped and talking about it made me think about how it could still go wrong. I got overwhelmed—but I kept breathing, usually I can’t. This time I made myself keep breathing until you came. It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know asking would upset me. I didn’t even know.” Her fingertips brushed lightly across his cheek. “She shouldn’t have hit you; that's what I’m upset about.” He snorted. “She came at me with a knife the first time I arrived to check on her. Slapping is nothing.” There was a pause and a faint glint entered his eyes. “I seem to recall you slapping me once.”

Hermione stared at him for a moment and then the corner of her mouth quirked up as heat rose to the

hollows of her cheeks.

She looked away, glancing around the room. “She said you set these rooms up.”

He nodded.

“They’re lovely.”

He grimaced. “It’s gotten cramped. I got carried away buying books.”

She smiled and gave him a sidelong glance. “That’s why it’s lovely.”

He laughed. She thought it might be the first genuine laugh she’d ever heard from him.

It only lasted a moment.

Hermione felt the corners of her eyes crinkle as she stared at him. “And you made me a lab.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up as he raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’m retiring you from healing. I thought it was time you pursued a branch of magic you enjoyed.”

The smile playing at her mouth faded away, and she looked down at her lap. “I—I don’t hate healing. It was just—traumatic—because of the war. The science of it did interest me.”

He stared at her, his eyes skeptical. “Was healing ever a career you considered before you realised the Resistance needed healers?”

“Well,” she fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, “there were only a few options available for anyone.”

“And by complete coincidence you ended up in the one that no one else wanted.” His voice was caustic. A large tray of food appeared, with heaping platefuls of vegetables, steak and kidney pie, and mashed potatoes, and apple turnovers.

Comfort food.

Draco made a sound of dismay as he stared at the food. “Weasley’s still interfering in the kitchen.”

Hermione ignored him and served them both platefuls of more food than either of them could possibly eat.

Draco kept muttering complaints under his breath while Hermione gorged herself. She couldn’t remember when she had eaten so much. It was all so familiar-tasting. Food she’d eaten growing up. Dinners at the Burrow during the summers before school started.

The reminiscence nearly made her cry.

In spite of all his complaints about wasting French gourmet-trained house-elves, Draco was not inclined to skip the meal. He glanced up at her when she finally began eating more slowly. “You should lie down once you’ve eaten.” Hermione shook her head. “No. I want to meet James.”

“You can meet him tomorrow. He’s not going anywhere.”

“I want to meet him today. I was supposed to take care of him, but he’s nearly two and I’ve never even met him.”

Draco stared as her while she met his eyes and obstinately forced down another mouthful of apple turnover. He gave an irritated sigh. “Fine. I’ll call an elf and have it tell Ginny to bring him.”

Hermione nodded and set down her plate. “Do—are there other clothes here for me? Or—did you just bring books?”

His eyes narrowed and the corner of his mouth twitched. “There are clothes. I’m not sure how many accommodate a pregnancy. If nothing fits, Ginny has some.”

Hermione nodded and went to explore the dresser. There was a huge quantity of clothes, much in the way there seemed to be unreasonable amounts of everything else. The dresser drawers seemed to go on and on as she pulled them out.

There were some robes, but most of the clothing was Muggle. Hermione hunted until she found a jumper and trousers that fit without needing adjustment charms.

James had dark auburn-red hair that stood on end and shockingly green eyes. Aside from his hair, he looked exactly like Harry. Hermione stared at him and felt like she was having her heart crushed.

His emerald green eyes studied her suspiciously while he clung tightly to Ginny.

The same eyes. The same mouth. Harry. It was Harry all over again.

“James, this is your godmother, Aunt Hermione. Remember, I told you about her? She was your dad’s best friend at school. She loves books, just like you, but not brooms.” Ginny spoke softly in his ear, nuzzling him affectionately with her nose. “And that’s Malfoy with her. You met him back when you were crawling. Remember, this is his house that we’re in. He’s the one who sends the elves to come see us.”

James leaned in closer to Ginny, burying his face against his mum’s throat and peeking at Hermione and Draco shyly.

“Hello, James,” Hermione said once she found her voice. “I knew you a bit before you were born. I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

James snorted and covered his face with a hand.

“He’s never seen any humans in person but me and Malfoy,” Ginny said, resting her head against James’. “But—if the way he is with the elves means anything, once he gets over being shy, he’ll never leave you alone again. James, can you say ‘Aunt Hermione’?”

“No.” James’ voice was piping and obstinate.

“Do you want to say, hello?”

“No.” Ginny sighed and poked his ribs. “Rude boy.”

James buried his face more determinedly into Ginny’s shoulder and laughed.

“It’s fine,” Hermione said in a thick voice, feeling overwhelmed just staring at him. “He looks so much like Harry.”

Ginny nodded with a tight smile and pressed a kiss in James’ hair. “He really does. It blindsides me sometimes. He’ll make faces sometimes and it just hits me like a bludger, and for a moment I’ll

forget I'm staring at him because—it's Harry. Then it's James again." She gave a laugh. "When he was born, he had brown hair and eyes and then at six months his soft baby hair all fell out and came back this red wiry mess and his eyes turned green. It didn't occur to me that he could get red hair. But Harry's mum had it too, so I guess it was enough red hair gene in the soup to make him ginger."

James abruptly popped his head up and stared at Hermione. "Mine-y." He pointed at her. "Mine-y."

"Hermione," Ginny said slowly, dragging out the consonants. James shook his head. "Mine-y."

"I couldn't say it when I was little either," Hermione said with a smile.

"He's a pretty good little chap." Ginny shifted him to her other hip. "Doesn't sleep much, and we had colic at first. But he's pretty happy now. Although, ever since he started walking, he's been a lot naughtier. Grabs everything he can reach—"

Hermione nodded automatically as she kept staring at James.

She wasn't sure how to interact with a baby. She was so used to thinking of them in the abstract. Actually meeting one who talked and had opinions about things made Hermione feel adrift.

She couldn't remember when she'd last seen or held a child. It had probably been when she'd helped transport orphans during the war.

The world Ginny existed in suddenly felt alien.

Hermione had forgotten about how expressive people could be. That she didn't need to primarily read people by the ways their eyes flickered and what they didn't say.

Babies, colic, development landmarks. If she and Draco were really free, that would be the kind of world they would be part of.

If it had worked.

If they were safe.

If Draco was free.

Hermione's chest tightened, and she nodded again at whatever Ginny was saying.

Her head was beginning began to throb.

"Ginny, Granger needs to rest now," Draco's cold voice suddenly broke in.

Hermione blinked.

Ginny's expression froze and then fell. "Sorry. I get carried away." She forced herself to smile again. "James needs lunch anyway. Rest. The elves will bring more food. If you—if you need anything, we're here."

Ginny's eyes and mouth were strained as she shifted James back onto her other hip and turned away, heading back to their wing of the rambling house.

Hermione watched them go. "She's so lonely, Draco. You could have let her tell me more about James."

“You need to rest. You have years to get to know him.” Hermione wanted to argue, but she did feel ready to fall asleep standing.

She curled up in bed and closed her eyes.

Draco sat beside her, holding her hand the same way he had during her morning sickness, his thumb running along the ridges of her knuckles.

She was just drifting off when she felt her hand gently set down on the bed. The mattress shifted.

She watched through her lashes as he looked down at her a moment longer and slowly turned, resting his hand against the wall as though he were feeling something inside it.

He drew his wand and started muttering spells.

Hermione watched him as he added enchantment after enchantment to the room. Some were simple, innocuous spells and others elaborate, magical incantations. She cringed when he slipped a knife out of his robes and held the handle between his teeth as he sliced his hand open and used the blood to draw scarlet runes on the walls. The symbols glowed as he kept adding more and more until they finally faded into the wall and disappeared.

He pulled out a vial of Blood-Replenishing Potion and took it before fishing out a vial of Essence of Dittany which he used to close the cut. He stared at his blood-covered hand and wiped it off on his robes before scourgifying his clothing.

He rested his hand on the wall again.

His shoulders slumped down for a moment before he squared them and headed for the door.

“Draco?”

He froze and slowly turned back to her. His expression was closed.

She just studied him for several seconds, her heart felt like a lead weight. “Are we safe here Draco?”

“Yes,” he said immediately.

She sat up, and his expression tensed.

“Really?”

He stood in the doorway, his wand in his hand. “It’s safe here. You have my word.”

She nodded. “If you say so, I believe you.”

He gave a stiff nod of his own. She licked her lips. “Do you need to keep adding wards then? If we’re safe.”

He stood staring at her, apparently uncertain about how to reply. She gave him a wan smile as a throbbing sense of grief swallowed her chest. “We’re supposed to get to rest now. You’re not supposed to keep—soldiering on and on like we’re still chained to the war.”

He just kept standing by the door.

She studied him sadly as she realised the difference between them: he had never had dreams about

what he'd do or be after the war. Unlike her, he had few expectations to be disappointed by.

He also had no idea what to do but continue with what he'd always done.

She reached out towards him. "Stay with me. This is supposed to be the part where we get to rest."

He kept standing at the door, his eyes flickering towards the next room.

"If there's something you need to do, I'll wait for you."

She saw his hand twitch before he gripped his wand in a fist. His eyes were suddenly boyish and uncertain.

He had no idea how to do anything but be a soldier.

He glanced towards the next room again.

She reached towards him. "Stay here, Draco. You're supposed to rest now too."

He nodded slowly but didn't move from where he stood in the doorway. Hermione got up and walked over. She met his eyes as she slipped his wand out of his hand, placing it on the dresser. She pushed his robes off his shoulders and ran her hands down his shirt and trousers, finding the multitude of concealed pockets he had, slipping out extra wands and weapons.

She wasn't sure if he'd brought any belongings with him but weapons.

He grimaced as she removed everything and piled it on the dresser.

She paused and looked up into his eyes. "We're safe, right?"

He swallowed and nodded slowly.

She took his hand. "Then put it down."

She stared at him as they lay face to face on her bed. His eyes kept flickering past her to the weaponry she'd taken off him.

"What did you want to be—before you were forced to become a Death Eater? What would you have done if the war hadn't happened?" He looked at her expressionless. "I was the Malfoy heir. If I hadn't become a Death Eater, I would have just been the Malfoy heir. My father had political aspirations for me—I would have been a politician."

"Oh... Well, what was your favourite subject in school?"

Somehow she'd never asked him that question before, and she wasn't sure she could guess the answer. They only knew each other through the facets that had been polished by war. He was silent for several seconds, and he seemed to be trying to remember. "I enjoyed Charms."

The corner of her mouth quirked up. "I should have guessed that. I remember that you were good at them. You could take it up again. Alchemy uses charmwork quite heavily. Maybe we could work together on projects someday."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Maybe."

He looked tired. Hermione burrowed against him, and he tangled his hand in her hair, pulling her

closer.

“We’re safe here?” she asked again, running her fingers along the placket of his shirt. “You’re not—you’re not just saying that we are so I’ll stay calm, are you?”

Draco drew back and looked at her. “We’re safe, Hermione.”

A catching sensation in her chest faded away. “Alright then.”

She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes.

When she woke hours later, he was asleep too. It was as though nine years of exhaustion had finally risen up and swallowed him.

He slept for days, nearly insensate. Hermione could unbandage his arm and treat it, and he wouldn’t twitch.

She slept with him for the first week. She hadn’t thought she was tired enough to sleep for consecutive days on end, but it was as though a relentless tension she hadn’t even registered had finally eased for the first time in memory, and sleep was more refreshing than it had ever been in her entire life.

Her headaches gradually went away for the most part. She found some parchment and a quill and carefully wrote down everything she could recall of the fading memories, and when she reviewed them several days later, many of the details were unfamiliar.

But her mind felt as though it had found a precarious type of equilibrium.

Draco kept sleeping steadily into the next week. He’d wake briefly to get up and eat, check the wards, and then collapse back into the bed, gripping Hermione. Sometimes she worried he must be ill to sleep so much. She’d check him with diagnostics to reassure herself. He didn’t sleep if she left.

She tried slipping quietly into the next room to explore the bookshelves, but he appeared in the doorway within two minutes, wand in hand. She grabbed several books off the shelves and returned to their bed.

“I can get up now,” he said, still standing in the doorway.

“No. I should keep resting,” she said, lying smoothly. “I just wanted to do some light reading.”

He was asleep again in minutes. She laced their fingers together while she read.

He’d been sleeping for nine days when there was a light tapping on the door.

Ginny slid the door ajar and peeked in. “James is having his nap. Can I come in?” Hermione closed the book and nodded. They’d sent each other several notes via house-elves, but she hadn’t seen Ginny for more than a few minutes since the day they’d arrived.

Ginny picked her way through the rooms into the bedroom and then paused, looking at Draco for several seconds before glancing away and conjuring a small chair.

They sat staring at each other for several minutes. There was apprehension in Ginny’s eyes as she studied Hermione. Hermione’s gripped Draco’s hand as she waited for Ginny to say something.

Ginny stared at their hands and then looked away, shifting uncomfortably. “I didn’t—I didn’t realise how intense you’d be with each other. I mean, I knew Malfoy was intense, but I guess I didn’t expect you’d—that it wasn’t just Malfoy—that you’re both—that way.”

Hermione could see the concern in Ginny’s eyes. She didn’t say anything.

Ginny had a wand in her hand, and she kept tossing it from one hand to the other. When she realised she was toying with her wand, she stopped and stared down at her hands for a moment. “You know, he didn’t give me a wand for the first year.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say. She traced her fingers over the tooled cover of her book.

“It was probably for the best,” Ginny said, her mouth twisting wryly. “I tried to murder him about a dozen times anyway. The last thing I remembered was being drugged with something on a lab table, and then I woke up here, alone. The first time he came, he told me everyone was dead but you, and I threw a steak knife at him. Later he told me about what you’d been doing during the war—that you’d—” Ginny’s expression twisted faintly, “you’d been with him—I didn’t believe him at all. I mean—I had thought there might’ve been someone you were with, but not—Malfoy. But when he said how it happened—it did sound like you...” Ginny’s voice faded away.

She looked down and cleared her throat. “But it was Malfoy. He killed Dumbledore. His dad —” her hand brushed over the ragged scar on her cheek. “The Malfoys have always hated Muggle-borns. And then Malfoy kept claiming he was going to bring you here but not. So, I assumed it was a trick. I thought Voldemort was planning to do something to James once he was born.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Hermione could think to say.

Ginny shifted. “I—I tried to kill myself. I got pretty close a few times.” She avoided Hermione’s eyes and fidgeted with the ends of her hair. “Malfoy came every couple days at the beginning, bringing clothes and supplies, and then showing up with all the books and stuff in here—saying you’d need something to do once he found you.”

Hermione’s fingers, entwined with Draco’s, twitched.

Ginny stared at their hands again before looking back at her wand. “The day I gave birth, I—I nearly smothered James. I was so afraid Malfoy would show up and take him away to Voldemort. He came a few hours later in wedding robes. He was so relieved I was still alive. I think it was the first time I saw an actual emotion on his face. Apparently he’d been sure I was going to die during childbirth—not that he actually seemed to care about us, it was more like James and I were priorities on a checklist. But—he was less—controlled that day. I was so angry at him, I asked if he was late because he’d been marrying you, given that he supposedly cared so much about you.”

Ginny drew a quick breath. “I didn’t think he gave a damn about anything I could say about him. I’d said pretty much everything at that point. But when I asked about him marrying you, he turned white and said no, it was someone else. He didn’t come as often after that.”

Ginny stared at Draco. “It was like watching someone starve to death. He would bring things that were obviously supposed to be for you, but he stopped—I don’t know how to describe it. He didn’t act like you’d be alright when you got here anymore. That was when he started getting so obsessed with the wards.”

Hermione looked down, her stomach knotting.

“The last time I saw him was last summer. He said, all the traveling had made Voldemort suspicious, and he wouldn’t be allowed to leave Britain anymore. He said, if he found you, Snape would bring you here, and reminded me that you were the only reason I was alive and then threatened me if I didn’t swear I’d take care of you. That’s when he gave me a wand. I didn’t see him again until you both got here last week.”

Ginny looked down and twisted her wand in her hands. “Once I had a wand again, I made a Wizarding Wireless the way Fred and George used to, and started getting the paper. It comes weeks late, but I finally started finding out what was happening. I—I knew it had to be bad but—I never thought—” Ginny’s face crumpled, and she couldn’t meet Hermione’s eyes. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Hermione wasn’t sure what Ginny was apologising for. She looked down at the book on her lap. “It wasn’t your fault. You’d only been an Order member for a few months before you got pregnant. It’s not as though you could have changed anything.” Ginny gnawed at her lip and looked down. “I knew you saw the war differently than Harry and Ron did, but—I didn’t realise how differently until I found out what you’d done. I don’t think anyone realised you saw it so differently you’d be willing to—to—”

Hermione just stared at Ginny, suddenly feeling too exhausted to have the conversation. “I would never ask anyone to do anything I wasn’t willing to do first. I thought you all would have known that about me.”

Ginny paled, her skin turning so starkly white it made the scar stand out violently against her features. “I know. I do know that. I just—I believed in Harry. I believed what he did about the war about the power of love. On the battlefields you’d see the worst in people, but you’d also see the best. I thought maybe you just didn’t get to see that from the hospital wing. But you were right—you were always right, and that must have made it worse for you than anyone— because you stayed with us the whole time knowing it.”

Hermione’s chest tightened, it was as though Ginny had touched an agony she’d forgotten she still carried. She pressed her lips together and squeezed Draco’s hand.

There were tears silently sliding down Ginny’s face. “I’m sorry that I didn’t want to believe you. You should never have had to do what you did.”

Hermione started to reply, but Ginny kept going. “I don’t want you to feel like you need to forgive anything. What happened—everything that happened—you don’t need to be alright with it. You shouldn’t make yourself be alright with it. You deserve to be angry. Don’t—don’t feel like you need to get over everything. I don’t want you to feel like you’re trapped for the rest of your life because people forced you to make promises to them.”

Hermione stiffened and she pulled Draco’s hand more closely to herself.

Ginny’s eyes dropped down, and her mouth tensed as she saw it. “I don’t just mean with Malfoy. I know you promised Harry you’d take care of James and me. I want you to know you don’t have to. You’ve done more than anyone should ever have asked from you. You were right, it’s time someone else does something. It shouldn’t be you anymore. You deserve to actually make choices. That’s

what being free is. So don't—don't spend the rest of your life being chained up by old promises. Not to anyone. Not Harry or me—or Malfoy."

Ginny stood up sharply. "I just needed to say all of that. I needed to say it at least once. You —" Ginny stared at Hermione, her eyes pained as they rested briefly on the undeniable swell of Hermione's stomach. "I'm so glad you escaped. You deserve to be free now. Really free. Not just as much as other people will let you."

Ginny's fingers darted up to her face and brushed rapidly across her cheeks as she slipped out of the room.

Hermione stared down at Draco's hand entwined with hers for a moment before looking at his face. "You can stop pretending to be asleep."

Draco's silver eyes slid open, and he stared up at her. His expression was reserved. The corner of Hermione's mouth quirked up as she noticed it. "I didn't go to all the trouble of saving you because of an old promise if that's what you're wondering. After all, aren't you the one who said I make conflicting promises just so I can do whatever I want?"

"Grang—"

"We said always, didn't we?" she asked in a strained voice. "Always. If you don't want that promise in full any longer, I'll give it to you in increments."

She held his hand more tightly. "Every day. I'll choose you."

She turned to face him more fully, entwining their fingers and tracing her fingertips along the ridges of his knuckles. Her fingers stopped at the onyx ring, and she stared at it, replaying their past.

Blinding pain and burning devotion in equal parts.

"I'm sure there are going to be good days and bad days for us," she said after a minute. "There's—there's probably too much for us to ever really put it behind us. But if you choose to stay with me, and I choose to stay with you—every day—I think we're strong enough to make it one day at a time." She met his eyes. "Don't you?"

He studied her carefully for a moment and nodded.

The next day, breakfast appeared with a two week old copy of The Daily Prophet on the tray. The front cover featured a photo of the burned out ruins of Malfoy Manor.

Hermione snatched it off the tray and stared, her heart pounding.

"High Reeve Killed in Fiendfyre Accident." She unfolded it with shaking hands, in order to read the summary beneath the fold.

"Draco Malfoy killed by father in shocking murder-suicide case at Malfoy Manor."

She looked up at Draco, giving a gasp of relief. "It worked, Draco. You're free."

Epilogue 1

High Reeve Killed in Fiendfyre Accident

Draco Malfoy killed by father in shocking murder-suicide case at Malfoy Manor.

Draco Malfoy, a prominent figure in the Dark Lord's government, and his father, a widower, are suspected to have died in a house fire.

Aurors are still investigating the case. The official statement from the Department of Magical Law enforcement is that the cause of the fire remains unknown, but officials speaking off-record have confirmed the fire possesses all signs of having been fiendfyre that was intentionally set and sustained.

Photos of the Malfoy Manor ruins are almost identical to the ruins of the Lestrange Manor fire from several years before. “Everyone knew Lucius was obsessed with that fire,” an unnamed source says, “he obtained all the records and files and revisited the Lestrange ruins dozens of times. It's almost undeniable that the fire was a recreation. It's so tragic: he never got over Narcissa's death.”

Close family friends say that Lucius abandoned most of his obligations following his wife’s death, handing over the title and estate to Draco, who was twenty years old at the time. Lucius has rarely returned to Britain in the years following, but during his most recent visit his behavior had been notably erratic. Aurors speaking off-record confirm that Lucius is now suspected in several cases of missing persons, including Astoria Malfoy, who vanished less than twenty-four hours after returning from a summer holiday in France.

There were persistent rumours of tension between father and son. Although outwardly cordial, they were rarely seen together, and Lucius did not return from his post abroad for Draco’s wedding in 2003.

The title and responsibilities of High Reeve are expected to be transferred to another Death Eater within the week. There are several Generals under consideration. However, at the time of printing, there is no official statement from the Dark Lord regarding a successor or about the deaths of Draco and Lucius.

The loss of a family line as old and distinguished as the Malfoy Family is a devastating blow to the wizarding world. Draco was the last of both the Malfoy and Black families. A healer from the Repopulation Program has confirmed that the surrogate to Draco Malfoy also died in the fire. She was four months pregnant with a Malfoy heir. After two weeks of sleeping, Draco and Hermione finally emerged. Draco immediately went to check all the wards on the island. After he came back, he gave Hermione a full tour of the house. She gripped his hand when they went into the gardens.

They walked around a corner and found Ginny watching James attempt to scale a pagoda. She gave a tight smile when she saw them.

“Good, you’re up. I wasn’t sure when you’d stop hibernating.” She eyed Draco. “There’s someone who’s been waiting to see you. Topsy!”

There was an immediate pop as Topsy materialised. She stood staring up at Draco for a moment, her

hands clasped together and her enormous eyes shining. Then she stepped forward and kicked Draco.

“Topsy is so angry at you!” she said as her toes collided with his shin. “Topsy is never been so angry in all her life.”

She wrapped her arms around Draco’s leg and started sobbing. “You sent Topsy away without goodbye. Topsy thought you would be dead!”

She buried her face in his clothes and howled with tears for several minutes until Draco awkwardly reached down and patted her head.

Ginny gave him a pointed look. “When she arrived and found out you were both here, she refused to believe it until she went to see for herself, and then she cried for the rest of the day. I can’t believe you sent her here like that.”

When Topsy finally let go of Draco, she went over to gather James into her arms and carried him away, still sobbing.

Hermione, Draco, and Ginny stood staring at each other in an uncomfortable silence.

Ginny tugged at the tips of her hair, and then her head gave a little jerk as she squared her shoulders. “I think we should plan to have dinner all together most days. It doesn’t have to be every day of the week, but I think it should be most. The rest of the time, we can all have— our privacy, but we should have dinner together.”

She studied Hermione and Draco’s reactions. Draco said nothing.

“Dinner would be nice,” Hermione said. “That’s a good idea.”

Ginny’s expression flooded with relief. “Good.” She nodded. “Great. Um. I’ll tell the elves and see you both at dinner then.”

Ginny turned and hurried inside.

Hermione watched her walk away and realised belatedly that Ginny would probably stop and come back if she called to her. She opened her mouth, but Ginny had already disappeared through the door. Hermione and Draco stood in the garden for several minutes in silence. She didn’t know what they were supposed to do.

It felt surreal. They’d been cut out of one reality, dropped into another one, and just left to find their way.

It didn’t feel like a dream. It was real. She could smell the salt in the air, hear the leaves shift in the breeze and the water trickling. She could smell camphor and pine needles. Draco’s hand was warm and entwined with hers.

And yet there was an edge of paranoia that she couldn’t shake. There had to be something lurking, something waiting, something that was going to go wrong. Inevitable ruin was dangling over her head like the sword of Damocles.

The island felt as though it were built upon a razor thin sheet of ice. If Hermione stepped wrong or forgot to the careful for a moment, it would crack, and she’d plunge back into the black, cold, world she’d just escaped from, dragging Draco and everyone else with her. Every step. Every breath.

Careful. Be so careful.

You always lose the things you love. Always.

Her jaw started trembling. She wanted to go back inside; it felt safer to be inside. Where was her wand?

“I never made any plans for this,” Draco said. “Being here.”

Hermione looked up at him, startled from her reverie. He was staring out towards the sea as though he was having difficulty believing it was there.

He found it all as difficult to believe in as she did. The world was never kind to them.

However, when he looked down at her, she realised there’d been a tension in him that was absent for the first time that she could recall. He was still on edge; he was still carrying two wands and several knives and a dark artifact, but there was the absence of a certain bracedness that Hermione had grown accustomed to. He no longer held himself as though he constantly expected to be struck on some quarter.

It was the expression he used to wear when they met in Whitecroft; when she could tell as he apparated into the room that he’d mentally prepared himself that she could be injured. Since she’d arrived at the manor, she realised, he’d always looked that way. Now, for the first time, it had faded.

Thin ice was at least something to stand on.

“What do you want me to do now?” he asked.

She blinked. “Whatever you want. You get to do whatever you want now.” He looked around them. “I don’t think I remember how to do that.”

Hermione gave a wan smile. “I don’t either.” She looked around and held his hand more tightly. “We’ll find out what it’s like together. We don’t have to hurry. We have the rest of our lives to figure it out.”

Once she wasn’t worried about waking Draco, Hermione set to work in her lab. It took her a week to build a basic prosthetic for him. The amputation had healed perfectly, but his blood stayed permanently thin unless he was regularly taking a potion for it.

He sat on the edge of her lab table while she carefully fitted the base of the prosthetic onto his forearm.

“This first prosthetic isn’t much,” she said as she muttered the spells. “It will only connect with major nerves, so you’ll only have a vague sense of the movement and touch. You won’t be able to do anything that requires fine motor control, but it will help maintain the neural structures while I make something better. If you wait too long, it’s hard to recover full range of movement with a prosthetic since you can’t feel it as clearly.”

She slid the metal arm onto the base. There was a quiet click as the two pieces fit together. She tapped her wand along the metal fingers, and there was a whirring sound as they twitched. She spent several minutes checking that everything was connected and studying diagnostics to verify she’d fitted everything perfectly. Draco tended to claim that everything was fine until he passed out.

She looked up at Draco with a nervous expression. “This is going to hurt a lot, but just for a split second and only this one time. Unless you break the base of the prosthetic I won’t ever have to do this again. I’m connecting the nerves. If I don’t do it when you can feel it, the connection doesn’t integrate as well.”

He clenched his jaw. “Just do it.”

“Amalgamare.”

Draco screamed through his teeth as the nerves in his arm were lashed together with the magical nerves in the prosthetic. A shudder ran down his entire body, including the prosthetic. The metal fingers spasmed with an audible clicking sound.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.”

He shook his head sharply and lifted his arm to stare at it. “It’s fine.”

She rested her hand against the cool metal. “Can you feel my touch?”

Draco was silent for a minute. “I can tell there’s contact, it’s a vague sense of pressure, but without a sense of texture or temperature or how much I’m being touched.”

Hermione ran her hand along the forearm up to the fingers. “That’s about as much as you’ll be able to feel with this.” She looked at him seriously. “You’ll have to be careful. Since you can’t feel it, you won’t always know how much pressure you’re using. There will be a temptation to over-compensate for the lack of sensory feedback by doing things more roughly in order to feel it. I made the hand breakable so that if you exceed a certain threshold the internal mechanisms will be the thing to break and not—something else.”

Draco’s expression tensed, and he looked at her sharply.

She started to run her wand and fingers along the prosthetic, checking the spellwork. Draco tried to pull his arm away from her.

She closed her hand around the wrist to still it, and he pulled harder. She glanced up and met his worried gaze.

She lifted her wand away. “Draco, you’re not going to hurt me. Look.”

She tapped a panel on the inner-wrist and opened it, revealing the mechanisms inside. “See where the tendons connect here? The pieces connecting each one are made intentionally breakable. If you tried to use enough pressure to break a bone, this piece will snap. You could bruise a piece of fruit, but you won’t be able to break a wand in half. If these break, the part of the hand they’re connected to will go limp.” She closed the panel again. “You won’t hurt me. I just wanted to explain to you why it will probably get broken a lot at the beginning. It's a part of the design. It will take a while to figure out how to tell when you’re using the right amount of force. I’ll teach you how to fix it yourself too. It’s all part of the process.”

She spent several minutes casting spells and testing it before she stepped back. “Can you touch your thumb and index finger together?” Draco stared at the hand for several seconds. His eyes narrowed when the hand stayed still. After a minute the thumb twitched.

He looked annoyed. “I can tell I’m connected to it, but I can’t tell how to make it do anything.”

“It’s fine. It takes getting used to. You’ll just have to practice. Close your eyes, and see if you can tell which finger I’m touching.”

They had so much time.

They explored the island. Draco showed her the trails and old, mossy paths that wound through the forests. They went down to the rocky beach, and Hermione stood at the edge of the water and stared at the vast ocean stretching out as far as she could see.

It felt like they were the only people on earth. Hidden a world away from the war.

Hermione went foraging. Draco had bought books about the edible and magical vegetation in the area at some point. The island was somewhere off the coast of Japan. Draco, and sometimes Ginny and James, went with her while she wandered through the forests and fields gathering ingredients to create her own supply cabinet. They slept. They went to bed early and slept late and sometimes didn’t get out of bed until well past noon.

They would sit in the garden and Hermione would never know what to say. There was so much time she never felt sure when it was the right time to say any of it.

Sometimes she just wanted to exist pretending her life had only started a few days after they arrived on the island. She didn’t want to reckon with the past. She was so tired of living her life on an eternal countdown.

There was so much time Hermione didn’t know what to do with it all.

Eventually it began to feel unnatural and anxiety-inducing. A cold sensation of dread would unfurl in the pit of Hermione’s stomach when she tried to relax for too long. It was the worst when Draco was away, which he was twice a day when he left to check the wards on the island.

She would visit Ginny and James for half an hour by herself, but when visits extended closer to an hour, she would begin growing tense with discomfort.

Empty hours felt like all the futile, poisonous days in Malfoy Manor.

She couldn’t turn her mind off. James was so much like Harry, but when he wasn’t, he was a baby, and Hermione’s hands would nervously run over her stomach as she watched him interact with Ginny.

James talked constantly. He treated Ginny’s mood like a touchstone that he mirrored back at her. Ginny mothered instinctively. She had an immediate sense of what James needed and seemed fluent in understanding the garbled words that rapidly, and sometimes tearfully, poured from his mouth.

Hermione was sitting on the veranda of the house watching while James was gliding around on a tiny broomstick that hovered a foot off the ground.

Ginny looked over at Hermione and noticed the strained look on her face. “Topsy, could you take James to the beach?” Ginny sat down next to Hermione and, after a moment’s hesitation, reached out and lightly touched Hermione’s hand where Hermione had unconsciously wrapped her arms around her stomach.

Ginny didn’t say anything, didn’t ask any questions.

Hermione had noticed that Ginny very rarely asked questions when Draco wasn’t present.

“I don’t know how to be a mother, Ginny.” Hermione said after several seconds.

The corner of Ginny’s mouth turned up, and she gave a small laugh. “You’ve mothered practically every person you ever been friends with. Harry and Ron would have died in their first year if it hadn’t been for you.” Hermione swallowed. “That’s not the same. I don’t even know how to interact with James. I can read him a book, but I don’t know how to tell why he’s upset or understand what he’s saying. I can’t tell that he’s tired. I don’t know how to read children. What if I can’t figure it out?“

“Well, they don’t start as two year olds. You get to know them. At the beginning they just want to sleep, eat, and be cuddled. If it’s none of those things, it’s probably a nappy change. You get to two years old one day at a time. Don’t worry, I’m going to be here. And Topsy knows everything about babies. She could probably single-handedly raise an orphanage.”

She leaned back on her hands. “When James was first born, I didn’t want to let him out of my arms, but I didn’t know anything about babies except what I’d read. I never knew any babies growing up either, you know. Nursing sounded easy when I read the chapter in the book, but when I tried, James was squirming and screaming. I couldn’t figure out how to make him latch on and stay on, and I was so scared I’d break him if I held too tight. I started crying, and James kept screaming louder. Topsy had been there for a month, but I didn’t trust any of Malfoy’s elves. I was on the verge of hysterical before she managed to convince me to let her help get James nursing. You’re not going to be alone.”

Hermione looked at Ginny for a moment. “I’m sorry. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to be here alone for so long.”

Ginny just gave a tight laugh and looked away. “I think it was a lot better than anywhere you or anyone else was that whole time. I really don’t have any room to complain.”

“Still.”

Ginny nodded, and her expression grew pained as she looked across the garden. “Sometimes —I think about all the time I spent hiding the pregnancy, and it feels like a pit in my chest that I’m going to fall into someday. Sometimes I wish I had just died with them. It feels so wrong that I’m alive when no one else is.“

“Don’t say that,” Hermione said. Her voice was strained and sharp. “You shouldn’t think that. Harry cared about you being alive and safe more than anything else.”

Ginny looked down. “I know. I know—I’m not—it just feels that way sometimes, you know? That I’m only alive because I did something selfish and lied to everyone. Mum would have been so excited. She always said she’d be the world’s best grandmum. She never even knew.”

“If anyone had known about your pregnancy, Voldemort would have looked for you. Draco wouldn’t have been able to pass someone else’s body off as yours. You and James are alive because it was hidden.” Ginny still looked grief-stricken, but she slowly nodded.

“Harry said—” Hermione hesitated and felt a wave of guilt that she hadn’t told Ginny sooner. “Before he made me promise to take care of you both—he asked me to tell you he’d be thinking

about you to the very end." Ginny was quiet for several seconds before her mouth curved into a tight, wistful smile. "I'm really glad you told him about James. I'm glad he knew that least."

Hermione reached out and gripped Ginny's hand. They sat in silence for several minutes, sharing the weight of all they'd lost.

Hermione buried herself into the lab when she couldn't handle all the excess time. If she were being productive, she felt able to breathe. It was nice to be creative without feeling like any amount of time she was spending there was countdown for someone's life.

There were countless things she could do. Draco had brought enough books and supplies to keep her occupied for years.

Draco, however, floated.

He checked the wards obsessively. He read. He practiced using his prosthetic hand. It took him two weeks to stop breaking the internal mechanisms, but in the process he figured out how to do considerably more with it than Hermione had expected. Then he'd sit in the lab and watch Hermione work for hours on end.

He didn't have anything to do with Ginny or James unless Hermione prodded him to.

Hermione left him alone about it. If he didn't want to do anything else for the rest of his life, he was entitled to do so. She liked having him nearby. If she couldn't see him, it would sit like a knot in the back of her mind, and she couldn't focus for as long before she had to go find him and reassure herself that he was alright.

When he was there, she could relax and focus.

She'd look up from a potion or from working on his new prosthetic and find him just staring at her with an unveiled expression of possessiveness that shivered down her spine and felt like fire in her veins.

She realised he'd muted the tendency at the manor. It had been buried under everything else. Smothered by his conviction that she'd never forgive him, that he'd die.

But as weeks shifted into months, his possessiveness reasserted itself. It was addictive, getting to relish something she'd never had more than snatches of.

She'd put down whatever she was doing and just drown in him. Kissing him, pulling his clothes off, and holding him in her arms, feeling him alive. They were both alive. They'd survived, and they had each other. He'd slide his hand along her throat, kissing down her sternum, and she'd hear him murmuring "mine" against her skin.

"I'm yours, Draco. I'm always going to be yours," she'd tell him, the way she'd always used to tell him.

But there were ripples at the edges of her consciousness. Sometimes, when she looked away from Draco, Hermione would find Ginny's strained expression as she watched them. Hermione refused to let herself notice it.

The only external thing Draco took an interest in was keeping track of the news regarding Europe.

The elves brought an entire stack of newspapers every week: European, Asian, North and South American, Oceanian. Any Wizarding newspaper that was translated into English, the elves were instructed to purchase and bring back. Read collectively, it was possible to get a vaguely accurate account of current events.

It was the extent of Draco's interests.

Hermione sat squarely in the centre of his universe and, now that she was safe, his unrestrained attention had nothing else to obsess over. Everything but Hermione was superfluous.

She thought it would be a phase. She'd thought that once they had more time that he'd let his focus broaden, but gradually she began to suspect that might not be the case. He had no inclination or intention of taking an interest in anything else. Ginny, James, alchemy; it was all just to indulge her.

Even their baby, in certain respects. He took an interest in the pregnancy because it was Hermione's, because she cared; but when he wasn't reminding her that "their daughter" needed Hermione to breathe or that Hermione had to keep herself safe for "their daughter", his concern seemed muted. Perhaps it simply paled in contrast to the blistering intensity that Hermione received.

It was exacerbated by his worry about her brain injury. She would regularly wake to find a diagnostic hanging over her head, Draco staring at it with a tense expression.

She'd push his wand away. "Don't. There's nothing we can do."

The damage was like creeping fissures in her memory; the red mixed with the golden lights still scattered across Hermione's mind. Over the course of the first month, the golden light began to seemingly crystalise around the red fissures in a way that was reminiscent of the way Hermione's own magic had buried her memories. Neither Draco or Hermione were certain about why it was happening or what it meant.

By September, Hermione found she couldn't access the memories even when she tried to. Rather than being something precarious she felt she shouldn't go near, she found herself completely locked out of them, as though she'd been once again blocked from accessing corners of her own mind.

She remembered that Draco's mother had been tortured and that he had become a Death Eater to protect her, but she couldn't recall how she'd ever learned it. The general knowledge was so deeply integrated into her perception of Draco that she remembered it even without having the memories.

She wasn't sure she would even be fully aware that the memories were missing except that she couldn't remember Draco's mother's name. It was bewilderingly arbitrary. She knew about his mother, but she consistently drew a complete blank about what her name had been in a way that made her jarringly aware of her memory loss.

Hermione knew that she had known it. She would find it scribbled on pieces of parchment and slipped into books she was reading and in her dresser drawers. 'Draco's mother was named Narcissa,' in Hermione's handwriting. But once she stopped actively thinking about it, the detail slipped away again. Wherever it was that her mind kept that knowledge, she was incapable of accessing it. A conversation with Ginny or a few hours in her lab and it was gone until she'd stumble across another piece of parchment reminding her "Draco's mother was named Narcissa."

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For several weeks she kept a diary that she reviewed and filled with more information every hour. She found that once the information was no longer actively at the forefront of her mind, it disappeared into parts of her mind that she couldn't reach. The rest of her memories from the war were returning with increasing clarity, but anything related to Draco's mother remained vague.

She knew Draco knew that she never remembered his mother's name. Whenever he told her anything about his childhood he always specified "My mother, Narcissa," in a way that was obviously habitual.

The memory loss seemed contained and restricted to information about his mother. Everything else was precariously intact.

She and Draco put together a book including details of all the things she didn't remember so she could review them. It was almost pointless because it was only a matter of hours before she didn't remember any of it all over again. She could remember that she was going to forget things, but she didn't know what they were. However it reassured her to know that she could find the information when she needed to.

She tried not to think about it for the most part. There were plenty of things she could do that didn't require her to recall those particular details. She had Draco. He was alive, and he wouldn't be if she still had all her memories.

She would have given up far more than a few memories to buy his life.

That fact did not console Draco.

They were lying in bed, and she was trying to find a spot where he could feel the baby kick.

She pressed his hand against the top of her stomach, and there was a sudden flutter against his fingers.

She met his eyes, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Did you feel that?"

He nodded. She guided his hand up near her ribs. "Her head is here right now, and her feet are down in my pelvis, kicking me in the bladder all night." The corner of his mouth twitched, but then his thumb grazed along the narrow scar running between her ribs, his attention shifting away from the baby.

She wrapped her fingers around his hand.

"Draco—" her voice was nervous, and her throat tightened as she spoke.

He looked up at her instantly. His silver eyes were intent, filled with the same possessive, desperate adoration she'd seen in face of Lucius. She swallowed. "Draco, you have to care about her."

He stared at her blankly.

Her heart caught in her chest. "You—you can't be the way your father was." His expression closed in an instant, and she gripped his hand more tightly. "You have to care," she said fiercely. "The way you are, you have to decide to care because if you don't, you won't, and she'll know."

Draco's eyes flickered with something unreadable.

She sat up and kept staring into his eyes. “She has to be someone that you decide to care about. Someone that matters to you. I don’t—” her throat caught, “I don’t know how—how I’ll be in the future. If something goes wrong—you have to be the one who loves her for me” —her voice cracked slightly— “the way I would love her. She has to be important to you.”

Draco had turned white, but he slowly nodded. “Alright,” he said.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

She nodded. “Alright.”

After months of revolutions breaking out in Death Eater controlled countries, the International Confederation announced its intention to “intervene” in the European situation in October of 2005. Europe’s instability threatened the statute of secrecy and endangered the worldwide magical community.

Voldemort barely had the troops to attempt even a semblance of a resistance. The Death Eater army had always relied heavily on the support of the Dark Beings, and with Voldemort’s alliances in tatters, he hardly had an army to mount. Even the Death Eaters had no confidence in their ability to win another war. Minister Thicknesse gave weak speeches about British Sovereignty, but despite the dutiful propagandizing of The Daily Prophet, the wizarding world was tired of war and no longer frightened of Voldemort.

There was too much discontent and too few Death Eaters. Without Draco as High Reeve, there was no one who could inspire the same terror. The International Confederation landed in Denmark in late October and swept down from Northern Europe in a curve towards Britain.

Watching the International Confederation’s Liberation Front effectively crush Voldemort’s regime had all the feeling of vindication, but there was also a profound sense of betrayal to see how differently things could have been if the International Confederation had been willing to aid the Resistance during the war.

A nauseating sense of pain and rage welled up in Hermione’s chest every time she thought about it. There wouldn’t need to be a Liberation Front if the MACUSA and International Confederation hadn’t left the Resistance be wiped out, imprisoned, and raped for several years.

Harry and Ron and everyone else might have been alive then.

Every time they received the newspapers, reading was a flood of both relief and poisonous grief.

Hermione devoted most of her time to creating a better prosthetic for Draco. It was like building a several thousand piece puzzle. She had to make all the components herself and fit them together in a way that didn’t interfere with the other elements. She finished it in November. Draco studied it as she detached the metal prosthetic and then clicked the new prosthetic into place. Draco hissed and then flinched as all the nerves connected to the new prosthetic.

“How did you—?”

She traced her fingers along the porcelain plating, a smile playing at her mouth. “You can feel it then?”

He nodded. He unfurled his fingers and closed them. There was an almost indiscernible metal whirring sound inside.

Hermione held the prosthetic in her hands, brushing her thumbs across the palm and watching the fingers twitch in response. “See the swirls? The porcelain is laced with silver threads. A sensory aspect on metal plating would have had trouble with variance and interfered with the other components, but by using threads of silver, I could lace them through the external plating of the hand and arm like real nerves. They’re concentrated on the fingers”—she stroked her fingers up to the fingertips, and he curved them precisely to catch hers—“so you should be able to feel most things now. The internal mechanisms of this are stronger than the last ones. My plan is to upgrade them every week or so as you adapt.”

“Clever. Although,” he picked up a pencil and twirled it between his fingers before rotating his wrist and observing how the hand moved, “you could have just given me a silver hand. It would have been quicker.” Hermione gave him an incredulous glare. “You really think I was going to give you a hand that slowly sucked out your life-force? You already have enough Dark Magic being constantly drawn on through your runes, you don’t need a silver hand doing it too. Even if it would have been faster, those are incredibly unreliable, I researched them, there are cases where they strangled—”

Draco chuckled under his breath, and Hermione cut herself off and stared at him for a moment before rolling her eyes.

“You have an appalling sense of humour.” She tapped her wand against a porcelain fingertip, giving it a small electric shock.

He yelped with surprise and cradled his new hand against his chest.

Hermione eyed him severely as she put away several tools and then pulled out a quill feather.

“Now, serious testing, try a spell.”

Draco reached for his wand, but Hermione stopped him with a sly smile.

“No. Not with your wand, just like this.” She extended her left hand demonstratively, pointing her index finger and mimed the Wingardium Leviosa hand motion.

Draco stared at her with surprise and looked down at the prosthetic. “You said last month it wouldn’t work.”

She smiled up at him and tucked a curl behind her ear. “I did. Then I figured it out. Although, no one has ever built a wand into a prosthetic before, so we’ll have to check it regularly to make sure all the components are safely isolated. Try it. It didn’t work very well for me, but I used one of your wands, so it was hard to say.” He extended his left hand towards the table. *“Wingardium Leviosa.”*

The feather lifted off the table and floated easily through the air.

Draco stared at the hand again and then over to her, his eyes glittering. “That’s—How did you make this work?”

Hermione’s throat tightened slightly, and she looked over and straightened her set of screwdrivers. “Oh—well, I actually used my research from deconstructing the manacles.”

She glanced up at Draco and found that he'd gone still as though he'd been frozen.

She cleared her throat. "Sussex had a lot of really exceptional alchemy and wand core research, you know, the way they stripped and channeled magic, so—" she lifted her chin and met his eyes, "I took the fundamentals of what they developed and used it to make something that wasn't horrible."

He kept staring at her for several seconds, and then he looked down at the prosthetic. Hermione looked down at her bare wrists. "The worst things are always created during wars; that's the way it is in the Muggle world too. There's never any way of putting them back in Pandora's box once they're let out. In a few years, I'm sure—every Wizarding government in the world will use manacles to suppress prisoners' magic. I thought it should be used to create something that helps people too." She gave him a faint smile and then picked up her wand. "Maybe someday I could send some of the designs to a hospital somewhere. Assuming not everyone maimed during the war was killed during imprisonment, there are a lot of people who could benefit from better magical prosthesis."

She looked up at Draco again, and he was still standing where he'd frozen. Then he stepped towards her and hesitantly captured her face in both hands, turning it upwards, and cradling it in his palms the way he used to. He traced his thumbs lightly across the arch of her cheekbones; one was cooler to the touch than the other. She shivered.

He pressed his lips against her forehead. "You're better than anyone," he said quietly, the words brushing against her skin. "This world doesn't deserve you at all."

It snowed in December. It was beautiful. It blanketed their world in white and Hermione would sit beside Draco and they would listen to the sound of it falling.

Hermione felt as though she were as big as a house, and eight months of pregnancy made her want to hibernate, but Draco pulled her out of bed and coaxed her to go outside anyway. "It's cold. Walking makes my feet and back hurt," she said sulkily while he wrapped scarves around her.

"I'll carry you."

She snorted. "You will not, you'll break your back. I weigh as much as an erumpent."

"I'll reinforce my hand so it doesn't break," he said with a smirk.

Hermione gasped indignantly, her eyes growing wide. "You're terrible."

"You told me to make you go outside every day even when you didn't feel like it."

Hermione scowled and pulled on her cloak, "I didn't expect it to mean you were going to interrupt my nap." "I tried to wait it out, but it was unending."

Hermione sniffed and let him lace up and tie her boots.

They walked on carefully cleared paths. The sky, trees and the ground were all glittering white from the freshly fallen snow.

"It's almost Christmas," she said. Her breath rose like a cloud as she spoke.

Draco nodded.

“I didn’t know I’d be this sick of being pregnant, but it’s hard to imagine that we’re going to have a baby soon.” She glanced over at Draco. “It’s going to be different once there are three of us.”

Draco gave another terse nod. Hermione squeezed his hand. “Hopefully she won’t inherit our combined stubbornness.”

Draco snorted. “If I were a betting man, I’d say the odds are heavily against us.”

Hermione smiled. “Probably.”

The baby was indeed stubborn.

Hermione’s due date came and went without so much as a Braxton Hicks contraction. Hermione went from hibernating to determinedly climbing every flight of stairs in the house and hiking up the steepest paths on the island in the hopes that it would make something happen. Anything.

She was nearly forty-one weeks pregnant and positive she could not endure being pregnant for another day when she finally had a contraction. Then another. They came at irregular intervals for two days before gradually occurring every eight to ten minutes and staying there. Topsy lingered, bobbing excitedly on her toes as she eyed Hermione knowingly. Ginny handed James off to a house-elf and provided everyone tea. Hermione tried to read and not feel hopeful that the contractions were going to ever stop being eight minutes apart. They were just intense enough that she couldn’t ignore them.

Draco appeared ready to die from chronic stress. He’d tense every time Hermione shifted or drew a sharp breath when a contraction peaked. His eyes never left her.

Hermione or Ginny cast diagnostics every hour to see if she’d even effaced fully and kept finding that she somehow hadn’t.

Finally, Hermione stood up with a despairing sigh. Ginny and Draco shot to their feet.

She pulled her cloak on and slipped her feet into her boots before casting a spell to lace them up. “I’m going to take another walk. Maybe it will make the labour actually start. If that doesn’t work—” she eyed Draco but didn’t mention the other options she was considering.

Ginny nodded, her mouth quirking. “I’ll go see how James is. You can send word when you want me to come back.”

Draco opened his mouth but then shut it soundlessly.

He gave Hermione his arm and let her lead him up as many staircases as she wanted. She stood at the top of a bridge, gripping his hand while she tried to suppress a moan and breathe through a contraction.

“Granger—I could go get a midwife.”

“Absolutely not,” Hermione said through her teeth as she doubled over. “Ginny and I can manage. I’m not having you risk it—and I’m not having you bring anyone here and then kill them afterwards in order to cover your tracks.”

Draco was guiltily silent.

Hermione released a low breath. “We’re not doing that anymore. We’re safe. We’re safe here. Don’t you dare.”

“I hate this.”

“I know.”

“It hurts.”

“Yes.”

“I’m tired. I've been pushing for hours.”

“I know.” “Stop agreeing with me.”

Draco was silent for a very long time after that.

Hermione wasn’t sure whether she were breaking his hand, or he were breaking hers.

Ginny was between Hermione’s legs beside Topsy. “Hermione, are you sure don’t want a mirror so you can see?”

“I do not,” Hermione said in a flat voice as she caught her breath before another contraction rolled through her. She curled forcefully forward with a groan.

“Good job. Head’s out. One more to get the shoulders through.” Ginny looked up at Draco. “Do you want to catch her?”

Draco just stared at Ginny until she looked back down between Hermione’s legs again.

Hermione gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut. She bore down again, focusing her entire body and mind on getting the baby out.

“That’s it. That’s it. Yes! Shoulders are out, just breathe now. Don’t push.”

There was a mewling wail and suddenly a wet, squirming bundle was deposited upon Hermione’s bare chest.

Hermione gave a small gasp as her daughter’s tiny, scrunched up face nuzzled against her sternum. The baby’s head matted with dark wet curls.

Her exhaustion was instantly forgotten. Hermione’s hands were shaking as she wrapped her arms around the baby’s vernix smeared body and rested her fingers on the sodden head. The baby looked up towards Hermione’s face, her mouth twisting as a vibrating wail emerged forcefully from her mouth.

Hermione felt speechless. Ginny and Topsy were both speaking, but Hermione paid no attention. The baby furrowed her feather light eyebrows and widened her eyes briefly.

They were as bright silver as a lighting storm.

Hermione gave a sob and held her tighter. “Draco—she has your eyes.”

Epilogue 2

Hermione sat in bed counting her daughter's fingers, looking at the tiny pink fingernails and tracing her fingers along the squashed profile. The baby had been weighed, checked all over with diagnostic spells, and then Topsy had swaddled her expertly. The matted brown hair was beginning to dry and stand in little tufts about her head.

"I think she's going to end up with my hair, poor thing. Although maybe she'll go platinum at six months," Hermione said. She glanced up, smiling, and found that Draco was standing near the wall, looking as though he were on the verge of apparating out of the room.

Hermione stilled and stared at him in confusion. He'd been right beside her through the labour to the moment she'd been handed the baby. She wasn't sure when he'd backed away.

Ginny and Topsy both slipped unobtrusively out of the room.

Hermione vaguely registered the sound of the door sliding shut as she studied Draco. He'd turned white, and his expression was more devastated than anything else. His fingers kept twitching.

"Draco… come see her."

He swallowed. "Granger—"

"She's your daughter."

His hands twitched, and she could see the muscles in his jaw clench.

"I know." His teeth flashed as he spoke through them. "I remember it happening."

The smile on Hermione's face faded away, and she flinched, holding the baby closer. It was like being slapped or plunged into ice water.

The happiness evaporated as though it had been an illusion. A dream she'd hidden herself inside.

She swallowed and looked down at the baby in her arms. The silence in the room was so heavy, she felt as though she were being crushed under it.

There were certain wounds that never fully faded. That likely never would.

"I think I should go," Draco finally said.

"Come here," she said in a flat voice, looking up at him again. He looked despairing as he stared at her and so pale it was as though his heart had been carved out of his chest and he was bleeding to death in front of her. He wasn't making any move to get closer.

"Draco, come here," she said again.

He hesitated a moment before he moved forward slowly. She slipped her left arm free and took his hand, pulling him closer until he sat down on the edge of the bed beside her.

Hermione drew a deep breath as she tried to determine what to do. She'd thought he'd gotten used to the idea of the baby, that they'd mostly managed to reconcile what had happened before her

memories returned.

He hadn't wanted to rape her. He would never have done so if there'd been any other way to save her. He'd never expected her to forgive him for it.

Maybe he still didn't.

She squeezed his hand tighter. He seemed unwilling to have any kind of physical proximity to Hermione or his daughter.

Her mouth was dry. "You—you promised to care about her. If you—if you—" her jaw started trembling, "If you were going to leave after she was born—you should have told me. This was a new beginning. All three of us. Remember? We left it all behind—all of it—so we could be together. You haven't even looked at her."

She shifted the baby to show her face better, but Draco stiffened and looked away. It was like being cut through, the rejection was physically painful.

"Look," her voice was fierce. "You have to look at her."

Draco reluctantly glanced down.

"She's just a baby. She's not going to hurt you, and you aren't going to hurt her. Just look."

Draco's head jerked sharply up and he gave a short, ragged laugh as he tried to pull his hand free. Hermione refused to let go. His expression was strained, as though he wanted to be anywhere, anywhere else on earth but where he was.

"Granger—" he said in a voice so tight it was shaking, "the only thing I do is kill things."

Hermione stared at him and then gripped his hand more tightly.

"No," she said forcefully. "That's a lie. You saved me. You saved Ginny and James. You could have been a healer. You can be a good father, I know it. It—it might not ever be natural for either of us, but we'll both try our best. You—"

"Hermione—" he released a sharp breath as though he'd been kicked. His voice was raw, and he still wasn't looking at her. "Granger…" he tried again to pull his hand away. "Granger, I've—I've killed children before. The last—infant I touched, I used the Killing Curse on after I executed its mother."

Hermione froze, staring up at his face.

At some point she had known that he'd likely killed children, but she'd dissociated from the knowledge. Ignored it.

Wizarding folk and Muggles. Friends and strangers. Men and women… and children.

She'd known it all, but she'd also forgotten it.

Then she remembered Stroud's matter-of-fact tone when she'd offered to relieve Draco of an unwanted female child: *"The ones with good potential will be raised to contribute to the program's next phase, and the others will be useful lab subjects. There's still so little understood about early magical development…"* She swallowed, trying to find her voice. "You didn't have a choice. You

didn't. You didn't have any choice." She looked down at their daughter. "We're starting over now. She's going to grow up away from the war, and we—we're going to leave all that behind. We're going to take care of her and keep her safe. Both of us. We're both going to take care of her."

Hermione turned towards Draco so that the baby lay in her arms between them. Their daughter's silver eyes peered up at them. Her hair had dried into a halo of brown curls around her head. Her face was pink and still looked slightly squashed. Both of her hands had escaped swaddling and were up near her face. She was aggressively sucking on the knuckles of her right hand.

She was the loveliest thing Hermione had ever seen.

"Look at her, Draco. She's ours. She's all ours. You're not going to hurt her."

He stared down at his daughter for several seconds.

When he moved, she could tell that he'd stopped breathing. His fingers spasmed as he started to reach out. He hesitated and then just barely brushed the baby's palm as though he expected his touch to poison or break her. The tiny hand reflexively closed around his finger, gripping it.

Draco sat frozen.

Hermione watched him and recognised the expression in his eyes as he looked down at the little person who was clinging tenaciously to him.

Possessive and adoring.

Aurore Rose Malfoy was, according to Ginny, the easiest baby ever born. In appearance she was an almost perfect replica of Hermione, except for her astonishingly bright silver eyes and Draco's mouth. She slept beautifully and rarely cried. She would lie for hours in her overly-indulgent father's arms, snoozing on his chest while he watched Hermione work in the lab. Aurore would gaze owlishly at pictures in herbology encyclopedias and sit very seriously while she teethed on her father's prosthetic fingers.

She was a quiet, solemn baby who matched her parents' seriousness, but her eyes had fire in them.

Hermione would carry her around in a sling, tucked up against her chest, where she could wrap her arms tightly and protectively around Aurore's tiny body whenever she felt nervous because the forest was too quiet or sky too wide.

Once Aurore could safely sit up, she would spend half the day sitting on Draco's shoulders, riding about with him while he checked the wards near the house.

Draco talked to Aurore more than he talked to anyone, even Hermione. He would monologue to her about anything, about the trees, and the furniture, all the shops where he'd bought books for Hermione, about what the weather might be, and what all the colours and hues of the analytic spells meant. Aurore would listen to him intently and fret when he got distracted or fell silent for too long.

Despite Hermione's philosophical opposition to co-sleeping, Aurore slept in the middle of the bed between Draco and Hermione. It was not because Aurore needed her parents in order to sleep, but because they needed her. Hermione regularly fell asleep on the floor next to Aurore's cot, holding her hand. Draco would get up several dozen times at night to reassure himself that Aurore was still breathing.

Aurore barely touched the ground for the first year of her life. When Hermione or Draco put her down, Topsy would instantly appear and bustle away with her, or Ginny would sweep her off to play with James.

Aurore would sit with Hermione, stuffing quill feathers into her mouth and discovering what kinds of sounds she could make if she struck Hermione's collection of cauldrons with wooden stir rods.

When she learned to walk, she would trail after people like a little shadow, watching Ginny in the kitchen and gardens, Hermione in her lab, and Draco on his daily route testing the wards. She only needed to be told a rule once, and she would follow it perfectly.

She would have been almost angelic, if not for the influence of James Potter.

From James, Aurore learned race around the house on a toy broomstick at such breakneck speed that Draco would turn white; how to climb the hills and trees and scrape her knees and tear her clothes, and make soups and mudpies in the creek. She also learned how to wrestle, to Draco's eternal chagrin.

Hermione often woke in the night to find a tiny, serious face gazing intently at her, so close that their noses were nearly touching. It would have been almost terrifying if it had not been a regular occurrence since Aurore had been moved into her own bed.

"Mummy, can I cuddle you?"

Aurore always asked Hermione because the only rule Draco managed to enforce was that Aurore was not allowed to sleep with them any more.

"Don't wake your father," Hermione whispered, scooting back against Draco's chest in order to make more room.

Aurore clambered into the bed, curling up tightly in Hermione's arms, her hands resting on Hermione's neck. She was asleep again in seconds.

Hermione nuzzled their noses together and closed her eyes.

"There are rules, Granger," Draco muttered into her hair. Hermione ducked her head forward. "I thought that was my line," she said. "Besides, I didn't want to wake you."

"I was awake the moment the door opened." Draco's tone was disgruntled. "As long as she knows you're going to say yes, she's going to keep coming every night."

Hermione hugged Aurore more tightly. "She won't want to cuddle forever."

Draco shifted and slid a hand along Hermione's hip. "You've been saying that for over a year now."

Hermione buried her nose in Aurore's hair. It smelled like moss and tree bark. "Well, it's been true the whole time. She'll grow out of it someday. I'll never know which is the last time she'll ask."

Draco sighed. His hand slid possessively around Hermione's waist, holding her as tightly as she was holding Aurore.

Life on the island was idyllic, like something from a fairytale. Gradually, it lasted long enough that Hermione began to tentatively trust it. The only disruption to their hidden world was the regular

arrival of the news, which Draco, Hermione, and Ginny would read in the evening when James and Aurore were in bed.

Hermione's panic attacks slowly became a thing of the past.

When Aurore was weaned, Draco and Hermione glamoured their appearances and very cautiously left the island in order to take Hermione to a mind-healer to find out what had happened to her brain.

According to the mind-healer, there was so much anomalous magical activity in Hermione's mind it was difficult to determine everything that had occurred. The memory structure was so precariously maintained there was little to be done. The healer strongly advised a low-stress environment and as little magical interference in her brain as possible for the rest of her life. There were a few mild potions she could take for her anxiety, but there were too many conflicting sources of Magic permanently present for there to be any easy solutions. The damage had been exacerbated by her ongoing use of Dark Magic prior to her injury.

Draco was quiet for a long time during their return trip.

"The Heart of Isis generally works by proximity, doesn't it?" he finally asked.

Hermione was staring out the window of the train, and she closed her eyes, cringing. This was a conversation she had hoped to never have with him, hoping it was detail he'd miss.

After a minute she nodded slowly. "Yes. For minor amounts of Dark Magic temporary proximity is sufficient."

"And for larger quantities? Say—repeatedly casting spells to analyse and deconstruct Dark Magic And even casting the curses themselves in order to determine a method of reversal, how much Dark Magic would that be, in your expert opinion?" His voice was deceptively casual.

Hermione leaned away, crossing her feet as she kept staring out the window. "It would depend."

There was a heavy pause, and Hermione looked down, adjusting the hem of her shirt so that it would lay flat. She could feel Draco's gaze boring into her.

She cleared her throat. "It could accumulate quickly if an individual was required to do it frequently because there were so many new curses that required analysis and they didn't have the time or resources to perform regular purification rituals."

She could see Draco nod from the corner of her eye.

"Where did you keep the Heart of Isis before you used it on me?"

Her throat tightened. "Under my bed sometimes, but—usually I had it on a chain around my neck. It was—" she swallowed, "it was hidden inside a protective amulet that I used to wear."

"What happened to the amulet?"

"Well," she twitched her shoulder, her voice dismissive, "I had to break it, in order to access the heart. So I threw the pieces away afterwards."

Draco was silent for several minutes. "I wish you'd told me," he finally said, his voice muted.

Hermione's mouth pressed into a wistful smile. "Neither of us were much good at asking for help. I

don’t think either of us made many choices with the expectation we’d survive the war long enough to regret them.”

Hermione turned to look at him. He was staring blankly across the train compartment, his gaze faraway. It was the expression he wore when he was replaying the past, trying to place what he could have done differently.

She reached out and took his hand, entwining their fingers. “If I could change the past, I’d save you every time.”

His expression didn’t brighten or change. She rested against his shoulder and closed her eyes. “Let’s love each other forever, Draco.”

She felt him kiss the top of her head.

“Alright.”

Hermione shattered a flagon of potion when a piercing scream tore through the house, followed by another.

The entire war rushed over her like a flood at the blood-curdling sound. She snatched up her wand and a nearby knife and raced through the house, nearly colliding with Draco and Ginny as they all burst into the room, wands drawn, and found Aurore with James pinned beneath her as she walloped him over the head with hardbound book while screaming with incandescent rage.

Hermione’s knees nearly gave out with shock and relief as she put the knife down on a shelf and stumbled across the room. Her chest was spasming as she struggled to breathe.

Aurore whacked James across the head one final time as Hermione dragged her off and carried her into a corner while Ginny picked up a howling James and hugged him.

“What. Happened?” Draco’s voice was deadly.

“He ripped it!” Aurore was shrieking. Her face was white with rage. “He ripped my new book!”

Hermione and Draco froze and stared at one another, eyes wide with disbelief. Draco was as pale as Aurore, and his fingers were spasming around his wand.

“I was just trying to see! Aurore wasn’t letting me see!” James shouted across the room through his tears, while Ginny was trying to check him for bruises. “I told her to share, and she didn’t listen!”

Aurore gave another scream of rage. “It was mine!” She turned and flopped into Hermione's arms. “Muuuuum, he ripped my book. My new book! He ripped the page with h-h-horses!”

Hermione hugged her and willed herself to stop shaking from terror.

She hugged Aurore more tightly, burying her face in the tangled curls, while she kept struggling to breathe calmly.

“I know. I know.” She stroked Aurore’s head through her thick, curly hair. “But we don’t hit people, not with our hands or with a book.” “He ripped my book!” Aurore’s rage transformed into despair, and she burst into tears.

“I JUST WANTED TO SEE IT!” James screamed across the room.

“It was mine!”

“Aurore!” Hermione said, her voice sharpening as her shock wore off, “We do not hit! You are not allowed to hit; you know that rule. What is more important, people or things?”

Aurore’s grey eyes widened. She dropped her head down and studied her feet. “People,” she said in a reluctant voice. “Yes. People.” Hermione forced herself to take a deep breath. “People are always the most important. A book we can fix or replace, but people aren’t replaceable. We don’t get them back after we lose them. We never hurt them. If something upsets us, we use our words, not our bodies. I am—so, so disappointed right now.”

Aurore’s face screwed up, and she tilted back her head and bawled.

Hermione picked up Aurore and hugged her while she crossed the room to check on James.

James’ face was buried in Ginny’s shoulder.

“Is he alright?”

Ginny nodded. “Not even bruised. I think he’s mostly in shock that Aurore was the one who lost her temper.”

Hermione sighed with relief. “I’m in shock.”

Ginny gave a nervous laugh, but her eyes looked as strained as Hermione still felt. “Well, I’m just glad to know I’m not the only one with a naughty child. I was beginning to worry it was my parenting.”

Hermione gave a tight, relieved laugh and shook her head. “I think we’re due for a nap and then some serious conversations. Aurore, do you want to say sorry to James for hitting him?”

Aurore peered through her tangled hair. “It was my book,” she said in a quavering voice.

Hermione winced. “Right. We’ll have to do that apology a little later. I’m so sorry, James.”

James’ face was still buried in Ginny’s shoulder, and he didn’t respond.

When Aurore was sleeping in her room, Hermione turned and collapsed into Draco’s arms.

“I thought someone had found us,” she said, her voice shaking. “When I heard her scream, I thought—I thought she’d been cursed. I thought when I went through the door that I was going to find her dying.”

Draco held her tightly, and his hands still spasming. She felt him nod and he rested his head against hers. She gave a low sob and tried to compose herself. She could hear his heartbeat, racing to match her own.

“I didn’t realise how I was still waiting,” she said after they stood in silence for several minutes. “It’s all still there. I grabbed a knife. I didn’t pause to think, I just grabbed a knife and ran.”

The Liberation Front had reached Britain a few days before James’ third birthday, but it took nearly a year before Voldemort’s final stronghold was toppled. Thicknesse and most other Ministry officials were arrested, along with all marked Death Eaters. In exchange for more lenient sentencing, several Death Eaters cooperated in removing the manacles from the freed prisoners in

Hogwarts and all the surrogates in the Repopulation Program.

Voldemort never even appeared. He hid inside his castle and after dozens of failed attempts to attack it, the Liberation Front left him there. It was kept under heavy guard, and the hope was expressed that he'd just die; his fortress eventually becoming his sarcophagus. Like Grindlewald, the newspapers said repeatedly, as though it put the entire matter to rest.

Some trials and convictions happened rapidly. The Death Eater regime had detailed records documenting their atrocities. According to The New York Seer *"following the death of Antonin Dolohov in the Sussex Lab Explosion, Death Eater Severus Snape had a heavy influence on the records and structure within the Death Eater regime. The cause of the explosion was never officially confirmed, and most of the lab's records were destroyed. According to Snape, the accident, which killed hundreds of Europe's most prized minds, could have been prevented with more cohesive oversight. In the aftermath, prisons and laboratories were required to keep detailed records at an external location, with meticulous details and the signatures of anyone involved, creating a crystal clear paper-trail listing anyone involved and making it undeniable who was responsible in every branch. Snape was assassinated in a coup d'etat in Romania in Summer 2005 and never realised that his exacting requirements post-war built air-tight legal cases against hundreds of his colleagues and fellow Death Eaters."*

Other aspects of the regime were messier and more horrifying, and as they emerged, the political spinning began.

The International Confederation couldn't deny knowledge of the Repopulation Program, but they claimed complete ignorance about the circumstances. The Supreme Mugwump gave a speech insisting that the International Confederation had been told that participation as a surrogate was voluntary, and that if they'd known prisoners were being used as lab rats, raped, and forcibly impregnated, they would have intervened years sooner.

Healer Stroud had fled Europe and disappeared long before the Repopulation Program trials began.

Hermione had to take anxiety potions in order to read about everything without hyperventilating. She'd known it had been horrific, but reading the testimonies in the trials that began was so devastating she felt as though she might break under the guilt. All the surviving surrogates were brought in to testify. Hannah Abbott was a shadow, cowering at the witness stand and hiding the left side of her face when asked questions about the compulsions and what had been done to her.

Due to the low virility of most Death Eaters, many surrogates had been dosed heavily with fertility potions, resulting in multiple births. Parvati Patil was brought to court heavily pregnant and had two children, barely walking, clinging to her robes.

When the surrogates conceived foetuses that showed low magic potential, the pregnancies were aborted and then attempts immediately resumed with more damaging fertility potions in attempts to "control" the results. Many of the surrogates had been rendered infertile with severe internal damage. Those that remained fertile were given six weeks to recover postpartum before being returned to the program for another baby. Angelina Johnson had an empty, tattered swaddling blanket that she held in her arms and refused to let go of.

To Hermione's outrage, the International Confederation was conflicted over what should be done. There were efforts being made to restructure the Ministry of Magic into something more

democratic, which would leave less room for someone like Voldemort to slip in behind the scenes and begin controlling it, but despite their horror over the trial testimonies, the British Wizarding society was keenly attached to their pureblooded “aristocracy.”

Voldemort hadn’t even been a pureblood, said one editorial. It would be a travesty to see Britain’s ancient families pay the price. The important thing was to settle things in court, make necessary reparations, and move on.

Hermione found her mouth curling in a snarl, and she put the paper down to consciously force herself to breathe.

The children and pregnancies from the repopulation program were all related to some of Britain’s oldest families, most of whom now had parents serving multiple life-long prison sentences. Who should raise the children? What should be done with the surrogates? The editorials opined about it endlessly.

Some of the women wanted nothing to do with the children they’d been forced to bear, some wanted abortions, while others were ferociously protective of their pregnancies and refused to let their children out of their arms. After nearly three years of living with compulsions, many of the surrogates had internalised them so deeply they fluctuated between compulsive subservience and vicious rebelliousness.

The courts began moving in favour of the Wizarding families, which were very keen to see their bloodlines maintained and their heirs raised suitably. Their lawyers argued that the surrogates were deeply unstable; it would be in the best interest of everyone to remove the children, provide some monetary compensation to the surrogates, and let everyone “move on”.

“I’m going to go back,” Ginny said abruptly after reading the most recent newspaper about the Repopulation Program trials. “I’ve been thinking about it for a few months now, and I think I have to.”

Hermione and Draco were silent.

Ginny looked down at the paper in her hands, her knuckles white. “They’re trying to erase it all. Trials, and money, and taking away the kids and giving them to old families with the exact same ideology that started the war. They act like once everything’s been ruled on, everything will be all better. They’ll raze and bury it all and paint themselves as Britain’s saviors, and let everything that happened and everyone that died just disappear. They don’t care about the survivors. They’re not even talking about the people who died. It’s like they’re trying to deal with everything as fast as they can so they can just pretend it never happened and that they're not collaborators.” Ginny released an angry breath and looked up at Hermione. “I’m going to kill him. I’m going to go kill Voldemort. He doesn’t deserve to die on his own in some castle. After that bastard is dead, I’m going to make sure that no one ever forgets all the people who died fighting.” She swallowed, her face was grey. “So I need you to take care of James for me so I can go back.”

Hermione felt herself grow cold. “And—” Ginny hesitated and inhale unsteadily, “I need you both to help me get ready. That bomb you made for Hogwarts, I need to know how to make it. I need to practice dueling. It’s been years since I fought. I’m going–I’m going to try to go after James’ 5th birthday.” Ginny’s eyes were beginning to swim with tears. “That way I have some time to say goodbye, in case–in case I don’t come back.”

“Ginny...”

“I have to do this,” Ginny said sharply. “I always tell James about how his dad and all my family were heroes who always fought to protect people. I can’t keep looking into eyes just like Harry’s, saying that, and doing nothing but living on this island for the rest of my life. James can’t live on this island for the rest of his life. He has to go to school at Hogwarts and see the world his dad died to protect–” Ginny’s voice cut off, and she wiped her eyes. “I haven’t done my part yet. This is my part. I’ve been thinking about it ever since the Liberation Front reached Britain, but I kept telling myself to let International Confederation handle it. But they’re doing it wrong. I can’t sit and read about it anymore.”

Hermione reached across the table, trying to grasp her hand. “Ginny. Ginny, if you do this, you could die. Don’t—don’t leave James an orphan.”

Ginny stared across the table at Hermione. “I don’t think I can keep living with myself if I don’t,” she said in a flat voice. Her face twisted. “You feel guilty for being here, and you sold yourself to try to win the war. You were imprisoned in a hole somewhere in Hogwarts while I was here gardening; you were raped and nearly died more times than I probably know about while I was teaching myself to make meat pies; and you feel guilty that you’re here, even though a mind-healer said going back would probably kill you.” Ginny looked down and swallowed. “Staying because of James is just an excuse for me, I know he’ll be safe with you.”

Hermione nodded.

Hermione reluctantly compiled all her research on bomb-making. She’d had time to perfect it. She’d refined the analysis and technique as a mental puzzle. She hadn’t planned to ever share it, or use it again.

Draco taught Ginny to duel. He was more unpleasant training her than he’d been training Hermione, and he was much more exacting. Hermione hadn’t realised how much time and consideration Draco had invested in strategizing and determining the best way to kill Voldemort. Hermione watched them train and realised with horror that if his psychosomatic tremors didn’t still manifested severely under stress, he probably would have gone back and tried to kill Voldemort after Hermione created his second prosthetic.

Hermione taught Ginny all the basic techniques involved in designing a bomb. Draco provided Hermione with as much information as he could recall about how the enchantments on the castle functioned.

Ginny looked over it all and then up at Hermione. “You should put your name on this. It’s going to be obvious that I didn’t come up with it. Even if you want people to think you died, you should get credit for inventing it.”

Hermione gave a strained smile and looked down. “I don’t want to, Ginny. I don’t want anyone to start looking into me. If they ask, tell them it was Order information you took when you escaped and you don’t know who developed it.”

For James’ birthday, Ginny went on a trip to the mainland with Draco and James. They returned with a long-legged puppy named Padfoot.

“I have to go on a trip, but you have to stay here and help Uncle Draco to keep the island safe,”

Ginny told James. “Padfoot will help you be brave like a Gryffindor, won’t he?”

James nodded seriously.

Ginny’s eyes were shining with tears. “I’m going to write to you—every day. The elves will bring big bundles of letters from me, and Aunt Hermione will read them all to you, and maybe she’ll help you write some letters back to me. You have to listen to Aunt Hermione and Uncle Draco, alright? And take good care of Aurore—she’s your best friend. You two have to stick together. Right? That’s what best friends do.”

Ginny left in November of 2008, leaving Hermione and Draco with two children to raise.

Ginny’s absence had a deeply sobering effect on James. Despite the efforts to conceal the war’s shadow from James and Aurore, the children had an undeniable sense of awareness about the precarious and anomalous world they lived in.

After Ginny left, James grew more serious. He would follow Draco around the house when Draco checked the wards. Aurore became the mischievous one.

Draco added an additional room to their wing of the house so that James wouldn’t be alone in another part of the house.

Hermione tucked James in first night after Ginny’s departure, with Padfoot in bed beside him. “Draco and I are just down the hall.”

James was sitting in bed, his arms wrapped tightly around Padfoot. “I’m a Gryffindor like Mum and Dad, so I’m brave,” James said in a quivering voice. There was a stabbing pain through Hermione’s heart. She wrapped her arms around James, kissing the top of his head through his wild red hair.

“I was a Gryffindor too, you know,” she said in a thick voice. “We Gryffindors need lots of hugs to be so brave, so we’ll have to give each other all the Gryffindor hugs until your mum comes back. If you need any extras, I’m just down the hall.”

Hermione woke in the middle of the night when Aurore failed to appear asking to cuddle.

Draco sat up when Hermione did. They looked in Aurore’s room and found it empty. They slid open the door to James’ room and found both children curled up with Padfoot in between them.

Draco stared with narrowed eyes for several moments before going over and taking Aurore back to her room.

The next morning, Aurore was asleep in James’ room once again.

Lord Voldemort died in January 2009, a week after Aurore’s third birthday.

According to the papers, his castle was breached by an elite team of MACUSA aurors accompanied by Ginny Weasley, the last surviving member of the Order of the Phoenix. They used a new type of advanced magic to break through the wards. The castle was then painstakingly deconstructed in order to dig Voldemort out of his hiding place and bring his decaying body into the light of day.

Most of the aurors were killed in the process, and Ginny nearly died. The auror leading the attack ordered that everyone fall back, but Ginny refused. She went in and cast her first and last Killing Curse.

The newspapers around the world featured a picture of Ginevra Weasley emerging from the rubble of a castle, her face filthy and streaked with blood. The brutal scar on her face was the first thing the photo clearly made out. She tossed her head back, her expression a mixture of exhaustion and cold triumph as she stepped into view, dragging Voldemort's corpse behind her.

There was no denying Ginny's heroism, despite the pointed questions about where she'd hidden during the last several years. Ginny was tight-lipped; she'd been confined due to sickness and a Wizarding family had hidden her. She had returned when she realised that the Liberation Front did not intend to kill Voldemort. She did not want to be treated like a hero; she only wanted her family and friends remembered.

The reconstruction efforts slowly shifted from the staunch lines about "moving on" to memorialising the fallen: the Resistance, the Order members, the surrogates. Ginny Weasley was unmoving in her solidarity with the surrogates. She didn't care about how ancient the Wizarding families or their traditions were. Pureblood ideals from old Wizarding families who couldn't be bothered to speak up against the atrocities committed in front of them had allowed the war. They didn't deserve to raise another generation with the same ideology that had resulted in the Wizarding War.

The courts tentatively decided to grant custody to mothers who wanted it. The titles and estates of the old families were stripped from the fathers, and the surrogates were granted control of the estates until their children came of age. The surrogates who did not want custody of the children were given "compensation", and the children placed into fosterage or an orphanage set up specifically to raise them to eventually take up their family's seat.

There had been talk of razing Hogwarts and building a new magical school, but Ginny refused to hear of it. It had been the first home of Harry Potter and the birthplace of Dumbledore's Army. Hogwarts would be rebuilt; it would have classes that taught about what had happened so that the atrocities of the Wizarding War would never happen again and never be forgotten.

When there were whispers about the curse on Hogwarts' DADA position, Ginny announced her intention to become the professor.

On the island, life adapted to Ginny's absence. James and Aurore grew intensely attached to each other to the point that Draco and Hermione often cast worried glances at each other when they observed it.

"She's not going to handle it," Hermione said while she watched Aurore and James wading at the beach. Padfoot was racing up and down the shore, barking madly at the seagulls. "She's so possessive. I don't know if it'll be better or worse to begin preparing her for it."

Draco nodded slowly. His hand was gripping Hermione's, but his eyes were intently watching Aurore as she went bolting down the beach after James, dragging a long piece of kelp behind her.

Ginny returned before James' sixth birthday. The reunion was joyful. She had brought back old pictures that had been recovered, photos of Harry, Ron, and Hermione at school.

James was overjoyed to see his mother, but Ginny was not there to stay. She was going to take James back to Britain. They were going to live in the rebuilt Hogsmeade village and help with reconstruction before the Hogwarts School was reopened the following year. "Come back with me,

Hermione," Ginny said while Draco was away checking the wards. "You should come back. Everything I'm saying and doing are all your ideas. I'm just repeating them. You'd be better at this than me. All the ways you used to want to change the wizarding world—you could do most of it if you come back. People should know you're the reason it was even possible to kill Voldemort."

Hermione's chest tightened, but she forced herself to give a small laugh. "I think you and Draco had something to do with it too. How exactly would that work? Would I bring Aurore with me and have her there while I try to clear Draco's name, or just leave them both behind?"

Ginny's expression grew strained, and she looked away. "You can't clear his name. I know you think he's a tragic hero, but that's not how anyone else will ever see him, even if you explain why he did what he did. I've worked with the aurors and lawyers. I've seen the records. Hermione, do you know how many people he's killed? The lists are so long—"

"I know," Hermione cut her off.

Ginny crossed her arms tightly. "He's like Voldemort was when we were kids. People whisper when they say High Reeve. No one even says Malfoy if they can help it. His signature is all over the trial records. It's not like Voldemort signed anything. The way the regime's records come across, you'd think he was the one actually in power post-war. Everything that happened, he was at least informed about."

Hermione's stomach twisted but her jaw grew tense. "It's hard to destabilise a regime without being informed," she said in a dry voice.

Ginny gave a resigned sigh and looked away again.

Hermione looked at her from the corner of her eye. "I'm not going to leave him, Ginny. There's no version of me surviving the war without Draco. Believing in the other person is the only reason either of us survived. I'm too tired to try to rebuild the wizarding world based on a lie about how I managed to live through it."

Ginny stared at Hermione, and her lips twitched as though she were debating something.

"Hermione—" She drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "Hermione, I know I said I wouldn't say anything else, but I have to say all this at least once before I go and leave you here." Her throat dipped as she swallowed. Her scar had reddened and stood out starkly the way it always did when she was upset. "You're all the family I have left besides James. You're more important to me than just about anyone else in the world. I owe you my life and I love you, and Harry and Ron loved you; so I have to say this once. I know you love Draco. I just—I don't think you realise how inhumanly cold he is to anyone who isn't you and Aurore. The rest of the world could burn, and he'd barely care. It's not like it was some simple spell he used to kill all those people. You have to mean the Killing Curse—" "I know what he's like, Ginny." Hermione cut her off. "It's the reason you and I are alive." Frustration flashed across Ginny's face, and she started to open her mouth again. Hermione stared at her.

"What did you think about—when you used the Killing Curse on Voldemort?" Hermione asked.

Ginny's jaw snapped shut, and she stiffened as she stared at Hermione, eyes wide. Then she pressed her lips tightly together until her expression twisted and grew anguished.

“Oh god. It was Harry,” she finally said, her voice wracked with grief, knuckles turning white as she clenched her hands into shaking fists. “I was thinking about everything he did to Harry.”

Hermione nodded, unsurprised.

She looked down at the onyx ring on her hand for several seconds before she spoke. “Love isn’t always as pretty or pure as people like to think. There’s a darkness in it sometimes. Draco and I go hand-in-hand. I made him who he is. I knew what his runes meant when I saved him. If he’s a monster, then I’m his creator. What did you think was the source of all his rage?”

When Aurore realised Ginny was going to take James away, she was initially uncomprehending and then, as they prepared to leave, hysterical. “He’s mine! He’s mine! He’s my best friend! You can’t take him away!”

She didn’t want to be comforted by Draco or Hermione. She clung to James and refused to let go. James was painfully conflicted about leaving, although he didn’t let go of Ginny’s hand for a moment.

“She can come with us,” he said, “I’ll take care of her.”

“No. No. Aurore has to stay with me and her father until she’s older,” Hermione said as she tried to pull Aurore off James.

“I want to go too!” Aurore said as Hermione pried her fingers off of James’ robes. “I want to live in Britain too. Why can’t we go too?”

“I’m sorry, Aurore, we can’t.”

“Why?” Aurore collapsed onto the ground and tried to crawl back to James before Hermione could pick her up.

Hermione pulled her up off the floor and held her tightly. “It’s not safe for us to go there. That’s why we live on this island instead of in the city with the shops, remember? Mum would get headaches there, and the healers told Mum that she can’t go places that give her headaches.”

“But James is my best friend. We stick together. Best friends are supposed to,” Aurore sobbed into Hermione’s shoulder. Draco stood by, looking completely at a loss; his fingers were spasming.

James let go of Ginny’s hand and went over to Aurore.

“Rory, you have to stay with your mum and dad. It’s not safe at Britain.”

“I can go. I’m a Gryffindor too,” Aurore said in a broken voice.

Draco winced. “Yeah,” James said slowly, and his expression grew pained. “But you can’t come because you have to take care of Padfoot. It’s not safe there for a puppy. He doesn’t come when we tell him too, and he barks too much.”

Aurore’s head popped up from Hermione’s shoulder. “Really?” she said in a trembling voice.

“Yes.” James nodded seriously. “It’s not safe for a puppy. You need to take care of him. Uncle Draco doesn’t like him, and Aunt Miney doesn’t go outside very much. He needs walks every day, so you have to do it.” James was gripping Padfoot’s leash tightly. “He’s still my dog though.”

Aurore nodded slowly, and James gave her Padfoot's leash.

After Ginny and James portkeyed away, Aurore sat on the veranda, hugging Padfoot and crying.

Four years later. Aurore ran in the lab and clambered onto Hermione's lap, a piece of paper gripped in her fingers.

"Mummy. Mummy look. Father took me to the market, and there was a lady—she had these on strings, and she let me have one." Aurore unfurled her fingers, and there in her palm was clutched a small, crumpled origami crane.

Hermione gave a small gasp, and her heart clenching as she stared at it.

"Oh, Aurore, that's lovely."

"She said if I make a thousand, I get a wish." Aurore stared at the crane with her silver eyes alight, then the light faded as she deflated. "But—wishes are just imaginary."

"What would you wish for?" Hermione asked, even though she was certain she already knew the answer.

Aurore looked up at Hermione hesitantly. "I wish we could go to Britain."

Hermione pressed her lips together into a tight smile. "That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Aurore nodded and stared wistfully at the crane she was holding.

She'd lost most of her playfulness after James had left. Draco and Hermione had tried to bring back the spark. Draco took her to the mainland to visit playgrounds and markets, Hermione even went with them on occasion. Aurore didn't want to be friends with other children.

There were too many obstacles. In the Muggle world, she was cautioned against making any references to magic. In the magical world, Draco and Hermione had very carefully warned her that she could not tell anyone her parents' names, where they lived, or mention how Draco and Hermione had altered their appearances.

The rules stressed Aurore. As a result, she did not play. She stood quietly at a distance, watching other children play with an expression of longing but declining all invitations to participate, even when Draco and Hermione urged her to. After four years, James remained the only friend she spoke of.

"Mum… can I go when I'm old enough to go to Hogwarts?"

Hermione's stomach twisted, and she blinked through the headache she'd already been trying to ignore. "I thought you were going to go to the school in New Zealand? So that Father and I can visit you and you can come home for the holidays."

"You can't visit me at Hogwarts?"

Hermione's jaw tightened as she thought about the Astronomy Tower with the Weasleys' bodies hanging below Harry's corpse; about the winding corridor she'd been dragged down before she was locked away; of sitting in the Great Hall while being trained as a surrogate. "I would—I'd probably get headaches if I visited you at Hogwarts. Some—very sad things happened to me there, and I

would think about them all if I was there."

Aurore was quiet. "I guess New Zealand has a good school," she said after a minute, picking up the crane and gently smoothing some of the creases.

Hermione could hear the longing in her voice. She reached out and straightened the wings and then arranged the origami bird so it would stand. "Did you know? I folded a thousand cranes once."

Aurore looked over her shoulder. "Did you get your wish?"

Hermione nodded and gave a small smile. "I think so."

"What did you wish?"

"Well—" Hermione's throat tightened, and she reached up and brushed back Aurore's wild curls. "I don't remember exactly how my wish went, but I think I wished for you. I think—I wished for a place to be with the people I loved; where I wouldn't be lonely anymore. There was a while when I was really lonely. And now I always have you and Father. So I got my wish."

Aurore's eyes lit up. "Can you teach me how to make a crane?"

Hermione was still for a moment, her heart catching painfully. "No. I'm sorry, I can't remember how to make them anymore. I tried to learn again, but it always slips away from me."

"Why?"

Hermione pressed her lips together and swallowed. "Well, back when I was pregnant with you, I hurt my head. It got hurt on the inside. It could have been a very, very bad injury. Bad enough that I wouldn't be able to remember lots of things. For a long time, we thought eventually I'd start forgetting more and more things. But—" a smile curved at Hermione's lips. "Even though you weren't even born yet, you used your magic and you wrapped it all around the parts of my brain that were hurt so that I wouldn't forget any more things. But the parts of my brain that are wrapped up in your magic; I can't reach them now. They're locked up tight so they can't break. That means that even if you tell me certain things or I try to learn them, I forget them again."

"My magic fixed you?" Aurore's eyes were wide

Hermione nodded. "Yes. It's called fetomaternal magi-microchimerism. That's what healers call it. It's very, very rare. As long as I'm very careful and don't do things that make me breathe fast or get headaches, the healers think I'll keep remembering most things until you're all grown up and have children of your own."

"Maybe you could have another baby to fix your brain if you start forgetting." Hermione gave a tight smile. "The healers said no more babies for me. Just you." Draco appeared at the doorway with his hair still brown and his features softened with spells. Hermione stiffened when she saw him.

"Mum was telling me how my magic fixed her brain," Aurore said.

Draco's silver eyes flickered, and he gave a terse nod.

Hermione dropped a kiss on Aurore's head. "Sweetheart, can you go ask Topsy what's for dinner? You father and I need to talk."

Aurore picked up her paper crane and slipped away. As the footsteps faded in the distance, the smile on Hermione's face vanished.

Draco stared at her and raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

Hermione swallowed, and her throat felt as though there were a stone in it. She reached under a pile of papers and withdrew a Wizarding newspaper.

"War Criminal Found Drowned"

Draco's eyes glittered for a split-second as he read it.

"They found Stroud drowned off the coast of Brazil," Hermione said in a quiet voice. Her fingers twitched against the paper. "She was found in a Muggle morgue. The official cause of death is a heart attack while swimming."

There was a brief silence.

"Pity someone didn't kill her," Draco said coolly as he flicked his prosthetic hand and muttered *"finite"* in order to pull off the glamours on his hair and features.

"Someone did," Hermione said in a voice that was almost a hiss.

Draco just stared at Hermione blankly.

"Don't. Don't you dare lie to me." Her heart was beginning to pound painfully in her chest.

Draco looked down and gave a low sigh. In a split-second, the sharpness of him re-emerged like a raw blade.

The version of himself that he wore so perfectly on the island whenever Aurore could see him, the softness, the crooked smiles, and quiet monologues. It all vanished as though it was a costume he put on. The perfect, unfailing persona of the father he wanted to be.

Now he was real again. As cold and glittering as razor-edged steel.

Hermione stared up at him, feeling as though there was a chasm inside her. "We said we were done." "No," he said, folding his arms and quirking an eyebrow. "You said we were done, and I didn't argue with you."

Hermione's jaw trembled, and she looked down. "You could have been caught. If they'd caught you, you would have been killed."

Her head was throbbing, and her sternum hurt as though he'd cracked her in half. "I'm quite difficult to kill. Considerably harder to kill than a middle-aged healer." His eyes were ice.

"What did you do?" She met his gaze. "Cruciatus until she drowned?"

The corner of his mouth twitched as he glanced away. "Clever as always."

Hermione didn't say anything else. She kept staring at him, waiting for him to look at her.

"She deserved to die," he finally said, staring stonily out of the window. "You had to have known I was going to kill her the moment the reports came that she'd fled. You knew I'd find her."

Hermione tried to swallow. Her shoulders were trembling as she held herself rigidly. “You lied to me. You lied to me. You hid what you were doing. You said you had to visit Canada to deal with a financial transfer. Now—every time you leave, I’m going to wonder what you’re really doing, and I’m going to worry that you’re never going to come back—” Her voice broke.

Draco’s expression rippled, and he reached towards her.

Hermione stood up sharply to avoid his touch, pressing her hand against her sternum. “Is this not enough for you? Is having a life so dissatisfying that revenge is worth all that risk?” Her eyes were burning. “In a few years, we’re going to have to tell Aurore. She’s going to go to school and hear about the war in her classes, unable to say anything. They’re going to talk about you. They’re going to tell her all the things you did.”

Draco’s jaw clenched.

Hermione drew a ragged breath. “It’s going to shatter her whole world—even if she hears it from you first. We don’t get to have all the things we want in this life, Draco. You were the one who told me that. You said, there was a point when I had to realise I wasn’t going to get everything I wanted, and that I had to choose something and let it be enough. I chose you. Always. I always chose you.”

Her lungs started spasming so violently it caused a strained whimpering sound in her throat. She pressed her hands over her mouth. Draco flinched visibly and reached for her again.

Hermione glared at him. “If this isn’t what you want to choose any longer, you owe it to me to at least tell me first.”

“Granger, it wasn’t like that,” he said, his voice tense as he approached her slowly. She stepped back. “Really? You just happened to come across her while you were an entire continent away from where you said you’d be? You’ve been looking for her this whole time, haven’t you?”

He nodded reluctantly, but his eyes were still unapologetic. “She deserved to die after what she did to you. I couldn’t leave her once I knew where she was hiding.”

Hermione’s mouth twisted and she looked away. “Then you shouldn’t have looked. You should have left it alone.” She gave a quiet sob. “The worst part is—I’m so glad she’s dead. I’m glad she suffered. I just didn’t want it to be you—why is it always you?”

Draco took two rapid steps across the room and caught her by the arm before she could back away.

Hermione wavered for a moment before burying herself in his arms. “I hated her. I hated her so much. I hated her.” “I know,” he said, cradling her face and pressing their foreheads together as she fought to breathe. “I know.”

She gave a low sob.

“I swear, I’m done now. Please breathe.” He held her tightly in his arms. “There won’t be anyone else.”

Ten years later.

Hermione stood in the Wellington Central Station watching the green flames of a large fireplace die away.

“It’s just the two of us now,” she said in a wistful voice.

Draco was silent as he stood beside her. His hand slipped around her waist, warm and possessive.

She rested her head against his shoulder. “You realise why she’s going, don’t you?”

There was a pause before Draco gave a pained sounding sigh. “Yes...”

A smile played at the corner of her mouth. “I suppose it was almost inevitable.”

She looked up at Draco, who was still staring at the fireplace; an expression of both bitterness and resignation was on his face. He looked down and met her gaze.

His features were hidden behind glamours, but his eyes were always the same. No matter how long she studied them, there always seemed to be nuances in the way the colour shifted that she had yet to discover. He felt things so intensely but privately. They were alike in that regard.

As he stared down at her, his eyes were molten silver.

The world around them faded away.

Her heartbeat quickened. “What do we do now?”

The corner of his mouth quirked into a smile that had only ever been for her. “Anything you want, for as long as you want to.”

Epilogue 3

August 2024

A fireplace in the British Ministry of Magic's international floo network flared suddenly to life, and a young woman appeared inside it, a small suitcase in hand. Her large, silver eyes were wide as the green flames died away, and she stepped out of the fireplace, taking in the high, vaulting ceiling of Ministry Atrium before looking into the crowd of wizards and witches bustling through.

"Aurore!" called a voice.

Several people turned to see Ginny Weasley hurrying across the room with her son, James Potter, a few steps behind her. Ginny crushed the young woman in a hug that lasted for several minutes before stepping back and studying Aurore.

"Look at you. Look at you! It's been so many years. I was afraid I wouldn't recognize you, but you look just so much like your mum," Ginny said, looking as though she were on the verge of tears.

Aurore smiled. "Yes," she said in a voice that hinted a slight New Zealand accent, "Father always says that."

Ginny shook her head in disbelief. "I still can't believe they finally let you come. I was sure you'd stay in New Zealand or maybe end up in Australia. Your mum wrote that you had offers pouring in after you aced all the exams—"

Aurore's cheeks reddened, and she looked down awkwardly at her shoes.

Ginny chuckled. "Don't blush. We all knew you were brilliant. But here you are in Britain, after all these years."

Aurore gave a smirk that was not reminiscent of her mother at all. "Well, they knew I'd always wanted to visit, but finding out I'd applied and gotten an offer from Gringotts was a surprise for them."

Ginny reached back and grabbed hold of James, pulling him forward into the conversation. Aurore and James' eyes met for a moment before dropping away.

"I still wish you'd gone to school at Hogwarts like James. I tried to convince your mum to let you, but New Zealand was about as far as either of your parents would consider when you were eleven. I know the two of you write constantly, but your studious qualities really failed to rub off intercontinentally. I'm sure you remember how James barely scraped by with the OWLs he needed to become an auror. I nearly died of shame. Professor of DADA, and my own son barely got an A."

James turned bright red and ran a hand awkwardly through his wild hair. "Mum! I got serious about grades for my NEWTs. You can't keep bringing up something from fours years ago."

Ginny gave an undignified snort. "I'll bring it up as long as I want. I couldn't meet anyone's eyes in the teacher's lounge for the first month of your sixth year."

James looked as if he wanted the floor to swallow him. Ginny laughed, seemingly oblivious of the wizards and witches eavesdropping around them in the Atrium. "Well, maybe you can knock some

sense into him now that you're in England. He's like Harry was all over again—always has to be the hero, even in training simulations." Ginny's eyes grew briefly misty before she blinked and gave another laugh. "He could use a friend who's level-headed and pragmatic rather than another Gryffindor like me. I'm always torn between pride and a howler."

The hollows of James' cheeks were stained scarlet. Aurore gave an awkward, tight-lipped smile and bobbed her head.

An elderly witch nearby cleared her throat. Ginny turned.

"Ginny, I haven't seen you since last month's memorial. How are you, dear?"

Ginny assumed a tight, practiced smile. "Mrs Tutley, I'm doing well—enjoying the summer before school begins. We're expecting a larger first year this September, and James is just finishing his second year of auror training."

Mrs Tutley nodded, seeming entirely disinterested by Ginny's reply as she studied Aurore through a pair of spectacles. "How lovely. Who's your new friend here?"

Ginny looked over. "Oh... This is Aurore Black. James and I knew her family when we were abroad. She just got a job at Gringotts, so she's going to be staying with us until she's settled in."

"Aurore Black?" Mrs Tutley's eyes widened, and she peered more carefully at Aurore. "Related to the Ancient House of Black?"

"They immigrated during the First War." Ginny said in a low voice.

Mrs Tutley's eyes grew rounder, and she said in a stage whisper, "Regulus?"

Ginny's eyebrow twitched, and she gave a non-committal smile. "I wish I could talk, but we've really got to be on our way. Aurore only has a few days before her first day of work, and I promised to give her a tour of Diagon Alley first thing. James, be a gentleman and take Aurore's bag."

There were many curious eyes that followed little group to the lifts. As the doors slid shut, whispering broke out. Ginny Weasley had always been intensely private in interviews about who had hidden her and protected James following the death of Harry Potter. The arrival of a family friend from Oceania would set the newspapers abuzz. A Black. Of course. Harry Potter had been a Black godson. It was obvious in retrospect that a branch of the old and reclusive family would have been willing to extend protection to Harry Potter's child, even if they'd been disinclined to join the war itself. Now that the reconstruction upheaval was reaching an end, it was unsurprising that an heir would make an appearance in order to claim the languishing family seat.

There were several owls posted to New Zealand's school of witchcraft and wizardry, making casual inquiries about a recent graduate.

Aurore was seemingly oblivious of the attention as she walked through Diagon Alley. Ginny Weasley was acting as a cheerful tour guide while James brought up the rear, alternating between eyeing his childhood friend and shooting cheeky grins at anyone he caught staring openly.

Ginny was pointing out a new restaurant when a middle-aged woman bumped into Aurore and then froze, reaching out and gripping Aurore's arm tightly. "Herm—!"

Aurore turned to stare at the stranger.

The woman cut herself off, snatching back her hand and pressing it against her chest for a moment. She had several porcelain-plated prosthetic fingers. “No. No, of course not. I’m sorry. You’re not. For a moment you reminded me of someone I knew once.”

Ginny turned, and a flicker of something appeared in her eyes.

“Angelina,” she said in a soft voice after a moment’s hesitation, “this is Aurore Black, I lived with her family after Harry’s death, when I was pregnant with James.”

Angelina stared at Aurore for a moment longer before looking over to Ginny, her shoulders drooping.

She looked back to Aurore. “Oh. It’s nice to meet you,” her voice was wistful. “I hope I didn’t scare you, grabbing you like that. I was just shocked. She looks a little like Hermione did, don’t you think?”

Aurore’s expression was blank; she looked towards Ginny.

Ginny stared at Aurore as though she were trying to see what Angelina was referring to. “Oh, yes. I think it’s her mouth, maybe?” Ginny glanced at Angelina and then back towards Aurore with a serious expression. “Hermione Granger. She was a school friend of ours. She died in 2005, during the post-war imprisonment, prior to the Liberation.”

“Oh,” Aurore said before looking at Angelina. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Angelina stared at Aurore for a moment longer before nodding and turning away. Ginny led the way to Flourish and Blotts. “This,” she said in a low voice, “was your mum’s favourite shop.”

“Of course,” Aurore said, her eyes glittering.

The bookstore was quiet. The back-to-school crush was not yet in full swing, and buyers were sedate and browsing quietly.

There was a large display of thick books just inside the entrance.

A Comprehensive History of the Second Wizarding War by Orpheus Bagshot.

Aurore paused, staring at the books for a moment before reaching out and picking up a copy.

“Just released this week,” said a helpful clerk who was standing nearby, eyeing the book in her hands.

“I didn’t recognise the title, I thought it must be.” Aurore flipped the book open to peruse the chapter index.

“Oh. You’re not from around here, are you? Not South African or Australian. You from New Zealand?” The clerk said, eyeing Aurore with greater interest.

“I went to school there,” Aurore said in a vague tone as she ran her fingers along the chapter titles. Her index finger paused briefly along the way. “Well, if you’re wanting a history of the war, this is—definitively, the best one out there. I read it in one go, didn’t sleep. Absolute zombie here at work the next day, but it was worth it. Orpheus is brilliant with words—related to Bathilda Bagshot

who wrote History of Magic and Hogwarts: A History."

Aurore arched an eyebrow and nodded. The clerk seemed to take it as a sign of encouragement and stepped closer. "He spent more than ten years on it. Got special permission from the Ministry to access all the records from the war, even trial transcripts that weren't public yet. It's shocking stuff. Some of the sections, I wouldn't recommend reading if your stomach isn't strong. But—if you want to know what happened. This is the book that'll tell you. It's all there. Everything people should know."

"Do you?" Aurore asked.

The clerk looked uncertain.

"Know everything that people should know about the war?" Aurore said in clarification.

The clerk looked uncomfortable. "Well—for me it's hard not to. I was born in 2005, one of— that generation. The trials went on for years while they tried to figure out what to do with all of us."

"I'm sorry." The boy cleared his throat. "Anyway. Reading that—helps put it all in perspective."

Aurore looked down at the book in her hands. "I'll check it out. I grew up outside of Europe, but we heard stories. You can't really not hear the stories."

The clerk nodded.

Aurore tucked the book under her arm and wandered further into the bookshop. Once she was in an empty aisle, she quickly flipped the book open to its index and ran her finger through until she found the chapter title she wanted. Page 186.

She flicked through to the place.

"*Draco Malfoy, known to the world as the High Reeve, is the most infamous mass murderer in all Wizarding history. The youngest person to ever join Lord Voldemort's ranks, he was only sixteen when he assassinated celebrated Warlock Albus Dumbledore. Malfoy devoted his life to climbing rank within the Death Eater army. Not only was he the youngest Death Eater initiate, he also went on to become the youngest individual to achieve the rank of General during the war.*

He possessed what was widely considered an unnatural proficiency in the Dark Arts. There is some debate among scholars about what means he may have used to obtain it.

In addition to the assassination of Albus Dumbledore, some of his most notable actions were the Surrey Massacre which led to the death of Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Order of the Phoenix's leader at the time, and the coordinated capture of all Order safe-houses during the Battle of Hogwarts. While many Death Eaters retired post-war, Malfoy's ascent was only beginning. He involved himself heavily in the capture and interrogation of all remaining Resistance members, using what became his signature curse to kill them rather than permit their imprisonment. His aggressive use of the Killing Curse was key to achieving his status as High Reeve and eventual acknowledgement as Lord Voldemort's successor. It is the belief of many that if Draco Malfoy had not been killed in the fire at Malfoy Manor that the Death Eater regime could have lasted decades longer. Lord Voldemort's health was so precarious at the time that many believe he would have handed control over to Malfoy before the year's end.

Dark Arts scholar Eustace Sederis wrote in his book Malfoy: A Biography of Europe's High Reeve: 'Draco Malfoy was a monster in a man's skin. He may not have resembled Lord Voldemort in appearance, but his legacy would have been identical. To manage so many consecutive Killing Curses, a person must be utterly without empathy and virtually soulless.'

Early Life

Draco Malfoy was born the only child of…"

There was a sound behind Aurore, and she instantly snapped the book closed and turned. James was standing at the beginning of the aisle, a cheeky grin on his face.

She studied him for a moment before smiling. James Potter had never been scrawny like his father, and two years of auror training had made him broad-shouldered. He had the beginning of a dark auburn beard along his jaw, and his hair stood roguishly on end, just long enough to hang over his eyes.

"Hey," he said. He was still holding her suitcase.

A smirk played at the corner of Aurore's mouth, and she quirked an aristocratic eyebrow, her grey eyes staring coolly up at him. "Hey yourself."

He rested his hand on a shelf over Aurore's head so that he loomed over her slightly. Aurore's eyes glittered.

He stared down at her. "Hiding from Mum already?"

The smirk faded, and Aurore looked down. "No. I was just curious about the new book. I thought I'd look up the section about the High Reeve."

The grin lurking in James' eyes vanished. "Don't. They're never going to tell it how it was."

Aurore shrugged. "I know. Somehow—I feel like I need to know what they all say anyway, but it's always the same thing. It quoted that line from Sederis, about the High Reeve being soulless."

She gave another shrug that was almost convincingly indifferent as she looked up. "What do you think the odds are that Mum's even in the index?

James rested a hand on her wrist. "Don't."

Aurore didn't listen. She turned, resting the book on the edge of the shelf as she opened it to the rear index, running her finger along until it stopped under a name.

She released a low breath. "Look..."

She flipped rapidly through the book and finally stopping at glossy photo page in the chapter on Harry Potter. There was a moving photograph with a caption beneath it.

Aurore and James both stared at the photograph. Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ron Weasley sat squashed together on a couch. They all looked faded and tired.

Harry and Ron's arms were slung around Hermione's shoulders as they turned their heads to stare at the camera and grinned, their eyes happy.

Hermione sat in the centre, so painfully thin her collarbones showed through the green jumper she wore. Her hair was pulled back into two taut braids that were pinned into a thick knot at the base of her head. Her face was set with large, devastated eyes, and she gripped the boys on each side of her.

Just before the photo looped, the corners of her mouth curved up into a sad, forced smile. Aurore studied it for several minutes in silence before reaching out and gently touching photograph. “I’d never seen a picture of her from the war. Your mum sent a few from school, but there weren’t any after her fourth year.”

James didn’t say anything, but when Aurore kept staring at the photo without moving, he rested a hesitant hand on her shoulder. She looked up and met his eyes before giving a sad smile that was reminiscent of the girl in the photograph.

She looked down again, and her fingers ran along the words captioning the photograph as though she wanted to rub them away.

“Someday… someday someone should set the record straight,” she said quietly.

James cleared his throat and shifted. “You know Mum offered to. She wanted to tell what happened to them, just up to the fire. Your mum and dad, they don’t want her to.”

Aurore nodded slowly, her eyes still glued to photo as it replayed over and over again. “I know they don’t. I get it. I do. If I lived through everything they did—I’d just want to leave it all behind. There’s no point trying to explain something like that; no one’s ever going to even want to understand.”

“But”—Aurore’s jaw trembled slightly—“she doesn’t deserve to be forgotten like this. She shouldn’t be a footnote. This shouldn’t be the only entry she even has. She deserves her own chapter. She deserves a whole bloody book of her own.” Her voice quavered. “And Dad doesn’t deserve to be compared to Voldemort and treated like some kind of soulless psychopath who wanted to do any of it—” she pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath. “Sorry. I always think I can handle this—and then I always get so—mad I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

She sighed and blinked rapidly. After a minute, she exhaled heavily and gave James a tight smile. “At least I have you, and Aunt Ginny. Mum says I can always talk to her or Dad, but”—her mouth twisted—“she doesn’t actually remember it all. She has to take potions beforehand, and if I start crying, she has trouble breathing and grips Dad’s hand until she starts turning white. And Dad always looks like he’d rather be murdered, and like he expects I’ll never speak to him again.”

Her knuckles were turning white as she gripped the book and finally set it down. “I don’t know what I’d do without you and Aunt Ginny; without being able to write to you about everything. It was so lonely at school, you know, having to give all the wrong answers because I might lose my parents if I gave the right ones. And always feeling like no matter how close I am to anyone, they’ll never really know me or any of the things that actually matter to me. You’re the only person who knows me.”

James smiled at her, his green eyes bright and earnest. “You’ll always have me.”

Aurore nodded and after a moment she smiled slowly back at him.

There was a pause as they stared at each other, as if they had only just realised they were standing alone together in an empty aisle. Aurore's breath caught slightly, and a faint flush appeared in her cheeks. James' eyes darkened, and he shifted forward, moving closer, and began to reach towards her.

The bell at the door rang out sharply. James straightened, drawing his hand back and running it through his hair several times as he cleared his throat and glanced around. "You know, Mum's probably going to show up any second if we don't go back out. But—um, we should talk more—about—" His face was turning spectacularly red. "You know—if you want."

Aurore stood frozen for a moment. "Right. We—should." She nodded repeatedly and shuffled quickly past him in the aisle.

They hurried back to the front of the bookstore, leaving the history book behind, still open to the page with the photograph. The photo caption read:

"The Hogwarts Trio, Christmas 2002. Harry Potter with friends Ron Weasley (See: Weasley, Ron, chapter 7) and Muggle-born witch, Hermione Granger. Granger left England at the start of the second Wizarding War to study healing abroad. She survived the war but died during imprisonment while a surrogate in the Repopulation Program. She was a non-active member of the Order of the Phoenix and did not fight."

The End

END OF BOOK THREE

Manacled